

Chapter 2



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The Origin of the Flagship Idea and Modern Adaptions

The notion of the public Flagship University has its origins in the early development of America's higher education system in the mid-1800s. It included a devotion to the English tradition of the residential college as well as the emerging Humboldtian model of independent research and graduate studies, in which academic research would, in turn, inform and shape teaching and build a stronger academic community. But just as important, the hybrid American public-university model sought utilitarian relevance. Teaching and research would purposefully advance socioeconomic mobility *and* economic development. As part of an emerging national investment in education, public universities also had a role in nurturing and guiding the development of other educational institutions. For these and other reasons, America's leading state universities were to be more practical, more engaged in society than their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere, evolving and expanding their activities in reaction to societal needs.

By the 1870s, most states had established one or more public universities—the first step in developing the world's first mass higher education system. In their mission to educate and train virtuous citizens and economic and political leaders, they also played a key role in supporting America's experimental democracy. For only an educated citizenry, it was believed, could properly carry out the civic responsibilities of a participatory form of government. In his effort to establish the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson noted the importance of higher education in a young nation with no monarchy or apparent class structure. As noted previously, universities could generate an "aristocracy of talent"; they could be the primary means of promoting science and learning useful to a land of

yeomen farmers and merchants. In a very real sense, universities were to be the American embodiment of the Enlightenment: a progressive institution devoted to reason, to individual empowerment, to pragmatism.

As state-chartered public universities grew in their numbers and influence, the words “Flagship University” emerged in the United States, drawing on the nautical term in which the flagship or lead ship in a navy provided the primary means of coordinating naval maneuvers by an admiral or his staff. Usually one university attained a leadership position in a growing network of public institutions.

Reflective of the New Flagship University descriptive offered previously, the American public university purposefully opened their doors to a wide range of citizens from different economic, social, religious, and geographic backgrounds—a marked contrast to the array of private colleges and universities that were linked to sectarian communities and social classes. They were also distinctly secular although not godless, reflecting the establishing principles of America as a nation: the first secular and constitutionally based government in the world. Although severely hampered by overt racism and other forms of discrimination, the ideal was that public universities needed to be open to all who had the interest and abilities to benefit from a course of study.

Leading state universities were also developed as comprehensive institutions. They incorporated traditional liberal arts fields of the era *and* professionally oriented programs with a direct service to local and regional economies. Teaching and research in areas such as agriculture and engineering, along with programs providing outreach and educational services to farmers and local businesses, helped fuel economic development and socioeconomic mobility. This remains an ingrained component in the mission of America’s public universities. Public service and engagement in economic development is now called a “third mission” by ministries and universities in most parts of the world, as if it were a new adventure and a departure from the traditional, and more comfortable, spheres of teaching and autonomous forms of research. This was never a “third mission” of universities in the United States, but part of their “core” purpose.

America’s public universities took responsibility for setting standards and developing other sectors of a state’s evolving education system—from the elementary and secondary schools, to other public tertiary institutions. State and local governments have the responsibility to build and regulate their education systems, and most initially invested in “common schools” (what today are elementary schools) and in one or more universities and colleges, but not in secondary education. State Flagship universities were central players in helping to develop the public high school as part of their assigned role to increase educational attainment rates.

Each of these distinct missions remains a component of the modern American university and forms a foundation for the New Flagship model—broad access, a wide array of academic programs, purposeful engagement with local economies, and leadership in developing public education. There were geographical differences, however, in the emergence of the American public university. In the eastern seaboard, where the US population first settled, private institutions dominated, and state governments were extremely slow to develop public universities. In the Midwest and throughout the West, however, states rushed to create new educational opportunities and established these key institutions.

Under the US constitution, states have the responsibility for organizing and coordinating their education systems; there is no equivalent power at the federal level in the United States of a higher education ministry found in most other parts of the world. But the push toward the Flagship model had an extremely important impetus from Washington. In 1862, and in the midst of the American Civil War, Congress passed and President Abraham Lincoln signed the Agricultural College Land Grant Act. It offered the one thing the federal government had lots of: land largely in the expansive West, given to each state to sell and generate income to establish or build existing universities, and, specifically, degree programs and research that would support local economies.

The “Land Grant Act” significantly bolstered the Flagship University movement. Without excluding “classical studies,” or military training, and emerging scientific fields, the subsequent largess provided funding, “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.” In accepting the funding from Washington, states and their universities were required to have education and research programs configured to promote agriculture, mining, and civil engineering, fields vital to the nation’s economy.

The United States was not alone in desiring universities with a utilitarian purpose. The notion, if not the title, of the Flagship University emerged in other parts of the world. In England, for example, Jeremy Bentham articulated the concepts of individual freedom and the need for English society to build public institutions that were utilitarian, secular, and egalitarian. Established in 1826, University College London espoused many of Bentham’s ideas, becoming the first university in England to be entirely secular, admitting students regardless of their religion and gender. But within the landscape of British universities, University College’s charter was unique.

Much later, England developed a set of “civic” universities that espoused similar egalitarian ideals. This included Birmingham University in 1900, followed by Liverpool in 1903, Manchester in 1903, Leeds in 1904, Sheffield in 1905, and Bristol in 1909. Each was founded in cities experiencing a boom in commerce, trade, and industry. England’s existing set of universities and colleges was distinctly elitist, reinforcing an existing rigid social class structure, and seemingly far removed from the educational needs of these emerging commercial centers. Business interests merged with civic leaders to build, fund, and support these new institutions; they admitted largely sons of merchants and bankers, and focused on providing students with “real-world” skills such as in engineering, medicine, law, and business (Eggs 2014).

Later these “civic” universities, bound to a specific city, became known as “red-bricks” as they were relatively new, compared to the ancients in Oxford and Cambridge. They, along with a group of colleges that called themselves Polytechnics that focused on vocational education, marked an important innovation, but distinctly less progressive or as broad a vision of purpose as the public universities in America. They offered training, but little applied or developmental research or the range of public engagement and active involvement in local economies that were essential roles of the great publics in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, California, and Washington.

There are other national examples of universities established and nurtured to be, in some form, transformative institutions. As Andrés Bernasconi and Daniela Véliz discuss in their chapter in this book, there is a long history of chartering Latin American universities to improve the socioeconomic conditions of their respective nations—what is termed their “social mission.” Often written in the midst of their postcolonial transition, these mission statements tended to focus on cultural preservation and enhancement, socioeconomic access, and, as stated in the charter for the Universidad de Buenos Aires, paying “particular attention to Argentina’s problems,” or in the case of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México founded in its modern form in 1910, to “conduct research primarily on national problems and spread as widely as possible the benefits of culture.”

Similar language can be found in the chartering of major public universities in the United States. The University of California’s charter of 1868 included the charge, “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement.”¹ In the admission of students, the criterion was secular (religion being one of the great divides in early American society), with wide geographic representation, and, soon

after its founding, open equally to women—although with ingrained biases on what studies they could pursue (Douglass 2007).

The University of Michigan, for example, was to provide an “uncommon education to the common man,” as stated by its president Henry Tappan; and the University of Wisconsin, along with most other state universities chartered in mid-1800s, saw that its ultimate mission was to serve every corner of the state and every citizen in some way. And in both the United States and Latin America, the leading public universities were, at some point, also granted significant levels of autonomy—at least in law, if not always in practice. But the desire and rhetoric, I sense, of a larger social and economic role in nation building in Latin America was often louder than the actual effect, and for many complex reasons. With a few exceptions, the major public and catholic universities in Latin America focused narrowly on access and, to some degree, social programs, and less on the broader role of research that benefited economic development that characterizes the history of America’s major public universities.

The Flagship University nomenclature has been used in various parts of the world, but never with a clear sense of its definition or meaning. In the post–World War II era and into the 1960s, the South Korean government established what it called “Flagship National Universities” in each of its eight provinces and two independent cities. In this era of nation building, and for a time in the midst of the Korean War, most of these institutions were the result of mergers of existing, smaller regional colleges. Today, each of these ten institutions have medical schools and like other designated national universities in Asia, they have the most competitive entrance exams. As noted, there was no clear description of what a Flagship University should be in Korea and the term was no longer used after about 1968.

Some European nations, in particular Hungary after the end of communist rule, explored using the Flagship title to distinguish a number of its leading universities. But an inherent political and organizational challenge of designating one or more existing institutions as a leading and perhaps favored university, particularly within the context of a national system with politically powerful universities with equal claim on public funding, essentially ended the reform drive. The need for mission differentiation, and with only a select few truly research-intensive universities adequately funded, is now widely understood by ministries and those who study higher education systems. Yet achieving this, either as a government directive as originally attempted in Hungary, or indirectly by competitive and selective funding of certain institutions, is politically difficult.

A new research project based at the University of Oslo uses the Flagship title to explore how some European universities are adapting to the demands of ministries and businesses to become more engaged in economic

development and social inclusion. In that project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, the investigators state that a Flagship University “is defined as a comprehensive research-intensive university, located in one of its country’s largest urban areas . . . [that is] in general among the oldest and largest institutions for higher learning of its country.”² The project seeks to explore the activities and goals of a variety of existing departments in some 11 northern European universities—in essence, an inductive approach in which case studies will help define what it means to be a Flagship University.

Another example of the use of the Flagship moniker is a project focused on collecting data and supporting the development of eight sub-Saharan African universities by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation. Based in Cape Town, researchers at CHET have used the Flagship title to help outline the current vibrancy, goals, and challenges facing these institutions (Bunting et al. 2013). Under the title the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA), the project initially pursued the hard work of gathering comparative data among the universities and, via a collaborative mode, outlined the idea of the need for an Academic Core of variables—for example, student-to-faculty ratios, goals, the percentage of faculty with doctoral degrees, and correlations necessary for top-tier national universities to pursue institutional improvement.³

It is clear from these examples that the Flagship University title means different things to different people, and is often influenced by national context. Internationally, it is only now coming into vogue. As the reader will see in the contributing chapters to this book, observers of higher education have a view that a Flagship institution is, generally, simply a leading national university with sanction and funding from national governments, one with the best students, the best teachers, high research output, and some influence on regional politics and economic activity.

But that is an incomplete, indeed severely limited and not a very meaningful description, much like the title of World Class University. For the Flagship title to be relevant, the following chapter seeks to explore and articulate its purpose and characteristics. This includes the internal culture of a Flagship University, and what policies, practices, activities, and outputs define it and make it relevant in the modern world.

Notes

1. California Constitution Article 9 Education Section 1, 1879. This is a reiteration of the charge originally passed in 1868 as a statutory law that established the University of California.

2. Based at the ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo, the research project is titled European Flagship Universities: Balancing Academic Excellence and Social Relevance. See: www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/projects/Flagship/.
3. The HERANA project is supported by funding by the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation and includes the University of Botswana, Cape Town, Dares Salaam Tanzania, Eduardo Mondlane University Mozambique, University of Ghana, Makerere University Uganda, Mauritius, and the University of Nairobi Kenya. Beyond developing comparative data and analysis, it has the goal as, “to disseminate the findings of the research projects, better co-ordinate existing sources of information on higher education in Africa, develop a media strategy, and put in place a policy dialogue via seminars and information technology that facilitates interactions between researchers, institutional leaders and decision-makers.” See www.chet.org.za/programmes/herana/.

