

# Why universities endure

*On the authority of ideas* • by LAWRENCE H. SUMMERS



**G**REAT RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES like Harvard are paradoxes. In many respects they are archaic. What other American institutions do business in buildings that are 150 years old, use the word “master” as a job title, and dress everyone up in black gowns to commemorate major events? Yet while respectfully antiquated, the great universities—backward-looking, decentralized, democratic—seem to have staying power.

We live today in a fleeting age, where most institutions are temporary and mobile. Harvard has had staying power for more than a century now, far outlasting other institutions. Indeed, if one looks today at the leading universities in the United States, the list overlaps with the list of the oldest universities in the U.S. to a remarkable degree. What is it that accounts for this remarkable adaptability of American universities? And why, according to one recent survey, were 17 of 20 leading universities in the world American? Understanding this source of excellence and staying power is central, if we are to continue to build upon it.

The success of American universities derives from three sources. First is an abiding commitment to the authority of ideas rather than the idea of authority. If a young graduate student who has been at Harvard 18 months disproves a senior professor’s interpretation of a text, this act is applauded by all; often the first person to offer congratulations is the person whose work has been corrected. I was admitted to this not-so-exclusive club during a freshman lecture last fall. I had assigned a project I had written on international financial crises. One student, asked to summarize and react to the ratings, began his comments by saying President Summers really didn’t present any evidence to prove his point and that actually his article contradicted itself. I’m still not sure I entirely agreed with that student, but what is more remarkable than the substance of our argument in class that day is that it could take place as a routine matter. In what other human institution would it be a non-event for the head of the organization to be described by a “new” individual as “confused”?

In many ways, this commitment to seeking truth through contrasting positions is what is best about great universities. We enter into dialogue with each other, not just to understand each

other’s perspective, but also to approach truth more closely: to seek what it is one looks for in the world that leads one to change one’s mind. If one has to identify a single source for the human progress that has transformed the lives of everyone of us, it is the idea of skeptical inquiry; of confronting belief with evidence; of submitting ideas and convictions to the possibility of falsification—and in no other type of institution is that process more central.

How, then, are American universities so successful? Primarily, I would say, by maintaining this ferment, this clash of perspectives, and this reliance on the authority of ideas. And we compete vigorously: for the best students, the best young faculty, and the allegiance of donors. Success does not come from the parroting of orthodoxy, but from the creation of insight. Without the competitive environment, the tendency toward self-replication, toward inbred comfort, could become dominant.

Finally, governing a university is a subtle thing. As we’ve seen too often abroad, and increasingly in public higher education here, efforts by larger governmental bodies to manage aspects of public life are doomed to fail. Creativity is repelled rather than attracted, inspiration is dulled—and disappointment is the result. At the same time, we have also seen that the team cannot be managed by its players. Too often, universities have been managed as *kibbutzim*, with academic leaders elected by faculty, students, and staff, thus undercutting mandates to impose high standards and the creation of leadership horizons sufficient for true long-term innovation.

Success depends on the middle ground. Leadership that is strong, not bureaucratic; leadership that recognizes the best ideas come from creative scholars, not managers; and leadership that knows that if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. For priorities, like energy, like capital, must be conserved. American universities have succeeded, and Harvard has been a profoundly successful institution. I’ve now been privileged to be the president of Harvard for more than three years. I believed the day I came that nothing was going to be more important than ideas and the people who brought them to fruition, and that no institution had more chance to contribute in these ways than Harvard. I am surer of that today than ever, and I look forward to sharing more of our ideas with you all. ♦