

BOOK REVIEW OF
DESIGNING THE NEW AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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Harvard professor Howard Gardner in *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* identifies storytelling as the essential capacity of all eleven highly successful leaders whose successes he has studied.¹ Gardner identifies three components of any persuasive leadership narrative—a protagonist; a set of objectives to be accomplished often against great odds, which by virtue of the effort, draws adherents to the project; and a foil against which the protagonist and her leadership story rail.²

It is useful to consider Crow and Dabars' *Designing the New American University*³ in the context of Gardner's thoughts about leadership. This book⁴ is unquestionably an enthusiastic and compelling leadership narrative intended to disrupt significantly higher education, introduce a particular type of change through the concept of "the New American University," and persuade other educators to join in a massive effort to reinvent a critical segment of higher education—the public research university.

The protagonist in *Designing the New American University* is most difficult to pinpoint. However, there are three options – the New American University as a disruptive concept, Arizona State University as the institution that embodies the concept of the New American University, and Michael Crow, the outspoken and dynamic president of Arizona State, as the person who embodies the concept—who walks the talk. Nothing in the narrative prioritizes for those who would engage the objectives of the "New American University," whom or what they should follow—whose narrative they should embrace. The objectives of the "New American University" are

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1. HOWARD GARDNER, *LEADING MINDS: AN ANATOMY OF LEADERSHIP* 14-15(2011).

2. *Id.*

3. MICHAEL M. CROW & WILLIAM B. DABARS, *DESIGNING THE NEW AMERICAN UNIVERSITY* (2015).

4. *Id.*

clear, albeit scattered throughout the book thus adding potentially yet another frustration to those who would embrace the leadership narrative.

According to Crow and Dabars, the New American University is an institutional model predicated upon the pursuit of discovery and knowledge-production, broad demographic representation of the socioeconomic diversity of the region and nation, and breadth of functionality and societal impact. However, the New American University is also pragmatic, entrepreneurial, massive in size, and comprehensive in range of services. It represents an imperative for especially public research universities to advance new and differentiated models that more squarely address the needs of the nation in the twenty-first century. The New American University is also dedicated to sustainability—to solving shared global challenges. It is an “adaptive” knowledge enterprise in real time and at large scale. It is optimistic, pluralistic, melioristic, transdisciplinary and “use-inspired.”⁵ It defiantly challenges the maxim that academic excellence and exclusivity are mutually dependent. For it, inclusiveness and academic excellence are a productive and societally advantageous combination exposing more and more students who otherwise would be prohibited exposure to the benefits of a research-oriented university. It extends the audience of students to whom the elites generally appeal to reach about 25% of the age cohort—all students believed to be capable of performing at a major research university. The New American University, to the extent that it is public, commits to serving all students in its respective state who are qualified. In so doing, Crow and Dabars believe it is returning to the original intentions of a state university—viz., to first and foremost educate its own students at a high academic level, at a reasonable cost and to unabashedly position them for employment upon graduation—especially for jobs that advance the state economy and quality of life.

Further, the New American University is appreciative of the role of institutional design in the advancement of discovery, creativity, and innovation. It is immune to *isomorphism*,⁶ all colleges and universities looking the same, and *filiopietism*,⁷ colleges and universities doing what others have always done in the past—an unconscious acceptance of “the way things are.”⁸ It is also quite evident that none of these defining characteristics of the New American University can be selectively employed. All must be actualized for institutional reconceptualization to occur. This is no task for the uncommitted or those who would simply like to make cosmetic changes to higher education.

5. CROW & DABARS, *supra* note 3, at 26.

6. Defined as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions.” *Id.* at 122.

7. Defined as an excessive veneration of tradition. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

The foil is also quite specific, and it is in its manifold delineation that the definition of the New American University becomes most apparent. Crow and Dabars privilege what they term “the gold standard” in American higher education—fifteen major research universities—over all of the other waves of institutions of higher learning to develop in the United States over time. It is these fifteen institutions that set the bar high for research universities. There are four waves of institutions of higher learning in the United States.⁹ The first wave are the colonial colleges dedicated exclusively to teaching and included small liberal arts colleges; the second wave are regional public colleges dedicated almost exclusively to teaching; the third wave constitute the land-grant universities that exhibited the stirrings of applied research in agriculture and in addressing the needs of local industry; the fourth wave is the roughly one hundred research-extensive and one hundred further research intensive institutions that constitute the set of American research colleges and universities that exist today. The fifteen members of “the Gold Standard” consist of five colonial colleges chartered before the American Revolution (Harvard, Yale, Pennsylvania, Princeton and Columbia); five state universities (Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and California); and five private institutions (MIT, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Chicago).¹⁰ The New American University is intended to complement this set of highly successful major research colleges and universities. While the authors tolerate other institutional forms of higher education, they clearly favor research colleges and universities as they, “. . . contend that America’s research universities are the most transformative institutions on the planet—or in the course of civilization. . . .”¹¹ That said, Crow and Dabars assert that many existing research colleges and universities do not provide solutions to twenty-first century challenges. They contend that research colleges and universities are limited by entrenchment in obsolete institutional design, lack of scalability, and residual elitism. According to Crow and Dabars these institutions have run their course and a new model is necessary: The New American University.¹²

Crow and Dabars extol the excellent reputation and global ranking of America’s leading research colleges and universities, yet they rail against the small number of elite colleges and universities upon which that distinction rests. Reputation relying on such a small handful of institutions, they assert, “does little to ensure the broad distribution of the correlates of educational attainment, nor does it sufficiently advance the innovation that

9. *Id.* at 13.

10. *Id.* at 84.

11. *Id.* at 7.

12. *Id.* at 10-13.

contributes to our continued national competitiveness.”¹³ Additionally, these elite institutions have been either “unable or unwilling” to expand the size and scope of their institutions to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of gifted and talented students—25% of the college age-cohort—who could benefit from what they offer.¹⁴ Provocatively and strategic to the advance of their leadership narrative, Crow and Dabars proclaim that the elites are more interested in excluding students than including them.¹⁵ They gain prestige, in fact, by rejecting far more students than they accept. Additionally, their high tuition fees exclude far too many worthy students, many from first generation families.¹⁶

Crow and Dabars extend their critique of research colleges and universities by noting that their bureaucratic administrative and academic infrastructure prohibits them from responding in scale and real time to global challenges requiring discovery and innovation.¹⁷ To break this logjam, Crow and Dabars call for perpetual innovation and entrepreneurship in research colleges and universities.¹⁸

Their critique does not stop with research colleges and universities. Crow and Dabars are particularly harsh when describing small liberal arts colleges. They note how few students they serve, how exclusive they are in admissions and price and how their scale and purpose depart little from the colonial era.¹⁹ Such comments, I contend, discount the many innovations in curriculum, pedagogy and world-class research made by liberal arts college faculty since the colonial era. Such radical statements, however, are understandable—but not entirely forgivable—in a polemic that wishes to attract the public to a particular leadership narrative and to minimize counter-narratives. Small liberal arts colleges and universities, for example, produce twice as many students who earn a Ph.D. in science than other institutions,²⁰ and much of that is due to the hands-on, direct engagement with research-contributing faculty at the very beginning of collegiate study.²¹ In addition, small liberal arts colleges and universities also have contributed significant pedagogical innovation to the teaching of science in

13. *Id.* at 23.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.* at 33-35.

17. *Id.* at 269.

18. *Id.* at 268-69.

19. *Id.* at 13.

20. *Baccalaureate Origins of S&E Doctorate Recipients*, NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (July 2008), available at <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf08311/nsf08311.pdf>.

21. See, e.g., Thomas R. Cech, *Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?* (1999), available at https://www.grinnell.edu/sites/default/files/documents/cech_article_0.pdf.

all types of American universities. For example, decades ago, Professor Priscilla Laws of Dickinson College—a 2400 student body liberal arts community founded in 1773—introduced the pedagogical practice of “Workshop Physics,” a discovery-based process of instruction at the undergraduate level. The results were impressive.²² Numerous research colleges and universities asked Professor Laws and her team to present her methodology to them. But according to Professor Laws in private correspondence, many of these institutions have adapted her methods superficially and incompletely.²³ Further, they have not acknowledged the source. They have either named the program themselves to gain that element of prestige Crow and Dabars castigate, or arguably the research intensive factions of their respective physics departments have been resistant to time spent on pedagogy rather than continued research, thus privileging research over teaching.²⁴

However, elsewhere in *Designing the New American University*, Crow and Dabars vigorously defend the virtues of a liberal arts education. They cite the importance of a liberal arts education to help students—especially prospective engineers—become “adaptive master learners.”²⁵ To underscore this assertion, they refer to James Duderstadt in, *Engineering for a Changing World: A Roadmap to the Future of Engineering Practice, Research, and Education*,²⁶ who argues that engineering should be considered as a “true liberal arts discipline, similar to the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. . . by imbedding it in the general education requirements of a college graduate for an increasingly technology-driven and –dependent society.”²⁷ They also cite Daniel Mark Fogel, president emeritus of the University of Vermont and a Henry James scholar, who in his article, *Challenges to Equilibrium: The Place of the Arts and Humanities in Public Research Universities*,²⁸ argues both for liberal arts as aptly suited to inculcate in students communication skills and a capacity

22. See, Priscilla W. Laws, Maxine C. Willis, and David R. Sokoloff, *Workshop Physics and Related Curricula: A 25-Year History of Collaborative Learning Enhanced by Computer Tools for Observation and Analysis*, PHYSICS TEACHER (Oct. 2015), <http://scitation.aip.org/content/aapt/journal/tpt/53/7/10.1119/1.4931006>.

23. E-mail from Priscilla Laws, Professor, Dickinson College, to Dr. William Durden, President Emeritus, Dickinson College (Aug. 21, 2015) (on file with author).

24. *Id.*

25. CROW & DABARS, *supra* note 3, at 142.

26. JAMES J. DUDERSTADT, ENGINEERING FOR A CHANGING WORLD A ROADMAP TO THE FUTURE OF ENGINEERING PRACTICE, RESEARCH AND EDUCATION iii-v (The Millennium Project, The University of Michigan eds., 2008).

27. *Id.* at iii-v.

28. DANIEL MARK FOGEL, *Challenges to Equilibrium: The Place of the Arts and Humanities in Public Research Universities*, PRECIPICE OR CROSSROADS: WHERE AMERICA’S GREAT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES STAND AND WHERE THEY ARE GOING MIDWAY THROUGH THEIR SECOND CENTURY 241-259 (2012).

for critical thinking as prerequisites for business success and for modern languages and area studies “as handmaidens of global commerce.”²⁹ Additionally, they refer to arguments about how superbly the liberal arts prepare students for participation and leadership in a world defined by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Given this extensive and robust encomium for the liberal arts and yet the pejorative judgment of a whole genre of institutions that unequivocally embody that course of study—small liberal arts colleges and universities—one can only conclude that Crow and Dabars favor the substance and effect of the liberal arts upon students, but disfavor at least one institutional form for their delivery—the small liberal arts college and university. Not unexpectedly Crow and Dabars’ privileging of institutional models in higher education applies to their assertion of the best placement of instruction in the liberal arts—research colleges and universities.

Crow and Dabars intend the New American University to be vast in scope and to serve students at scale—large scale. Arizona State University over the last decade deliberately engaged a design process to become the prototype for a New American University. According to the vast amount of data presented by Crow and Dabars, the effort is successful. For example, over the course of the decade in which reconceptualization of the university occurred, degree-production increased more than 68 percent. Enrollment increased 38.3 percent, from 55,491 to 76,771 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, between fall semester 2002 and fall semester 2013. Preliminary figures for fall 2014 indicated enrollment of approximately 83,145 students—roughly an 8.3 percent increase from the previous year and a 49.8 percent increase over Fall 2002. The Fall 2013 freshman class numbered 10,232, with a mean high school grade point average of 3.39 and median SAT score of 1100. Preliminary figures for Fall 2014 indicate freshman enrollment of 11,124, which represents an 8.7 percent year-over-year increase and a 63 percent increase over Fall 2002.³⁰ Increased performance and contribution locally, regionally, nationally and internationally of students and faculty are the focus of the entire Chapter Seven of *Designing the New American University*. The authors clearly wish to supply their would-be participants in their leadership narrative with the facts to justify commitment to a big idea.

Yet despite the authors’ impassioned commitment to the New American University as a much-needed model for change in higher education, they are philosophical about the distinctiveness of its emergence and the exclusivity of its application. They consider new forms of colleges and universities to have been common in the history of American higher education. Additionally, they posit that as societal and economic conditions

29. *Id.* at 241.

30. CROW & DABARS, *supra* note 3, at 256.

change, newer models for higher education are needed, not as total replacements for what is in place but “recalibrations” of what has historically evolved. Institutions must be individually responsive, with the changes based on their evolved definition, purpose and accomplishment. The New American University cannot and should not be unthinkingly adapted; rather it should, according to Crow and Debars, serve as a model for change.

There are three topics raised by Crow and Dabars that require sustained treatment: the origins of pragmatism in American education; rankings and the New American University; and, leadership for the New American University.

Crow and Dabars assert in a chapter entitled “A Pragmatic Approach to Innovation and Sustainability” that the American pragmatic tradition is relevant to the central tenets of the New American University. The university that they envision and that is being modeled at Arizona State University holds knowledge as worthy only to the degree that it can be applied to informing and solving societal challenges. The ideal university for them seeks a “useful” education and eschews that which focuses solely on knowledge for knowledge’s sake alone. Pragmatism in education must be understood then as productive inquiry to solve a societal challenge. Such pursuit requires the ability not to be limited by inherited knowledge. Research—called by the authors “use-inspired research”—is directly connected to the production of useful knowledge—new knowledge to solve contemporary societal challenges. For Crow and Dabars, the New American University is especially concerned that knowledge should lead to action with the objective of real-world transformational impact.

Crow and Dabars trace the origins of pragmatism—understood as education for social usefulness—to a circle of Harvard academics and Cambridge intellectuals during the 1870s known as “the Metaphysical Club.”³¹ The Club includes the logician, mathematician, and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce and the philosopher and psychologist William James.³² Crow and Dabars also identify the philosopher and educational theorist John Dewey as having contributed significantly to this movement towards “usefulness” in American education.³³

The authors, however, would have further strengthened their leadership narrative by locating the inclination towards pragmatism in higher education with the very founding of the nation and its colleges and universities immediately after the American Revolution. Association with additionally extensive and “noble” subjects invites public sympathy for leadership narratives. Inclusion of an earlier political narrative would have

31. *Id.* at 215.

32. *Id.* at 215-16.

33. *Id.* at 216-18.

located the authors' criticisms of higher education with the beginnings of the nation. In fact, Crow and Dabars are best judged as part of a persistent and ambitious attempt to create a distinctive American education to serve the practical needs of the country through higher education.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from Pennsylvania and a friend of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and other founders interested in a new higher education for a new nation, said the following in a speech at the University of Pennsylvania in 1795:

I shall begin by taking notice that the same branches of learning. . .are taught in American seminaries [colleges] and in the same way, in which they were taught 200 years ago, without due allowance being made for the different obligations and interests which have been created by time, and the peculiar state of society in a new country, in which the business of the principal part of the inhabitant is to obtain first and foremost means of subsistence. . .It is equally a matter of regret, that no accommodation has been made in the system of education in our seminaries to the new form of government and the many national duties, and objects of knowledge, that have been imposed upon us by the American Revolution. Instead of instituting our sons in the Arts most essential to their existence, and in the means of acquiring that kind of knowledge which is connected with the time, the country, and the government in which they live, they are compelled to learning. . .two languages [Rush is referring to spoken and written Latin and Greek] which. . .are rarely spoken [and] have ceased to be the vehicles of Science and literature, and which contain no knowledge but that which is to be met with in a more improved and perfect state in modern languages.³⁴

Dr. Rush unequivocally anticipated the positioning of the New American University as an institution that focuses on learning most relevant to inform and solve contemporary challenges. Dr. Rush advanced knowledge for action and transformation for the express purpose of building a new nation. This is a useful education that is proposed originally for America's colleges and universities. The foil for Rush and his fellow founders were those colleges and universities before the Revolution that adopted the English form of classical education. Dr. Rush wanted something more immediate, robust and attuned to the immediate needs of the citizens in the new nation. This was to be the distinctive American higher education—a useful education. This pragmatic definition was advocated by Dr. Rush for Dickinson College, a small liberal arts institution he founded in 1783, just five days after the signing of the Treaty

34. HARRY G. GOOD, BENJAMIN RUSH AND HIS SERVICES TO AMERICAN EDUCATION 235–36 (Witness Press 1918).

of Paris.³⁵ And in his 1785 “A Plan of Education for Dickinson College,” Benjamin Rush reinforced a useful education in the curriculum for Dickinson by introducing instruction in chemistry, and German and French instead of Latin and Greek. He associated these new subjects in American higher education with the nation’s competitive and pragmatic advancement in commerce, war, agriculture and manufactures.³⁶ Dr. Rush also anticipated that American institutions of learning would be co-existent with their immediate surrounding communities—a key tenet of the New American University for Crow and Dabars. Dr. Rush, in a 1786 open letter to the Trustees of Dickinson College, stated that “the credit and increase” of the college depended “upon the healthiness of the town” and identified specifically “the stagnating waters” that would inhibit prosperity and increase of commerce for both.³⁷

Dickinson College was going to be, for Rush, one of several colleges that would link into a national university for the very practical purpose of educating those who would work in the federal government of the new nation (imagine any elected official or employee of the federal government today having to obtain a specific degree to serve—to be thereby, knowledgeable). Tellingly for the history of pragmatism in American colleges and universities, the existing college leadership at the time rejected Rush’s vision as is evident in the first publishing in 1973 of Dr. Rush’s written draft of A PLAN OF EDUCATION FOR DICKINSON COLLEGE 1785.³⁸ Most of his pragmatic innovations were lined through in the text, most likely by fellow trustees and the then college president.³⁹ The United States, I contend, never had a revolution in higher education. Crow and Dabars’ provocation with the concept of the New American University thus remains relevant and timely.

Crow and Dabars are aware that commercial rankings like those of *U.S. News & World Report* are imperfect and, as such, are a threat to the adoption of an enterprise as innovative as the New American University.⁴⁰ They are right. For Crow and Dabars, commercial rankings, so ardently followed by the uninformed public, employ simplistic methodologies, “which pretend that the criteria for evaluation across all institutional types are consistent and immutable, [and] purport to establish precise numerical

35. CHARLES COLEMAN SELLERS, *DICKINSON COLLEGE: A HISTORY* (Wesleyan University Press 1973).

36. Plan of a Federal University” October 29, 1788, Benjamin Rush

37. “To the Trustees of Dickinson College” in *LETTERS OF BENJAMIN RUSH*, Volume I 1761-1792, ed., L.H. Butterfield, Princeton University Press, 1951.

38. Benjamin Rush, *A Plan of Education for Dickinson College* (Working Paper, 1785).

39. Benjamin Rush, *A Plan of Education for Dickinson College* (1785), available at <http://chronicles.dickinson.edu/resources/Rush/>.

40. CROW & DABARS, *supra* note 3, at 266.

rank orders.”⁴¹ Crow and Dabars contend rather that indicators of quality are often either arbitrary or subjective, and precedence in hierarchies inevitably corresponds to the variables of age and wealth.⁴² Even when introducing the myriad of positive results of the New American University as embodied in Arizona State University this past decade, Crow and Dabars are cautious to contextualize the achievement within the parameters of a state university without immense wealth and embracing ambitions to be totally accessible. They note that their results must be evaluated within the context of their accomplishment by a large public university committed to drawing from the broader talent pool of socioeconomic diversity and advancing a culture committed to academic enterprise and improved cost-effectiveness through productivity gains and constant innovation.⁴³ This is a university re-calibrating itself and redefining its terms of engagement in higher education rather than entering into a head-to-head competition with institutions that have matured over the course of centuries. The authors know that commercial college and university ranking systems do not account positively for innovation and, in fact, will penalize it—even if it is innovation to correct what is preventing colleges and universities from educating more of the American population to a standard that will permit more comprehensive societal and economic transformation. In essence, the rankings are not working in the current and future national interest but are rather, defining the past. Implicitly Crow and Dabars call for substantial reform in ranking methodologies if educators and the American public are going to embrace the reforms necessary to establish the “New American University.” The ability to educate a broader base of our citizens cannot place high value on traditional data points used by commercial rankings to assess colleges and universities—for example, low student-faculty ratios that will never get to scale with the metrics of the New American University, high investment per student—disregarding what a university can do effectively and creatively with the money it has and a focus on incoming student metrics (SATs, class rank, etc.) rather than outgoing increases in achievement.

For Howard Gardner, a leader must embody her leadership narrative.⁴⁴ The aspirations that are expressed in the story must be lived openly and vigorously so that the public is inspired to join the cause to which leadership is directed.⁴⁵ In the case of the New American University, its objectives require behaviors that are not traditionally part of the skill set of college and university leaders. For example, the New American University

41. *Id.* at 121.

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 266-67.

44. GARDNER, *supra* note 1.

45. *Id.*

must engage in *transdisciplinarity*—defined as collaboration among universities, business, industry and government.⁴⁶ Most university leaders gain their experience exclusively within academia. They have little association and operative skill with other sectors of the economy. Crow and Dabars stress that in operationalizing a re-conceptualized institution, recalibrations by senior leadership are inevitable. I suggest then that a president who leads an institution through transformation to become a New American University must identify new partners, press her case to investors, seize unexpected opportunities, remain responsive to changing conditions, and deploy the university's resources in ways that empower its many parts. The president must advance her community in novel and unexpected ways. In essence, the leader of a New American University must be entrepreneurial, innovative and risk-taking—not a set of traits typically associated with academic leadership. Colleagues of the institutional leader must be attuned to these leadership traits and adjust accordingly if the concept is to be realized. For example, a university general counsel, I suggest, will have to recalibrate his understanding of risk, as traditionally exercised, because a president pursuing the New American University will stretch the parameters of risk well beyond that to which attorneys have traditionally become accustomed.

Clearly the New American University needs a particular type of leader—one who can at once uphold the values of academe and advance enterprise and entrepreneurship; one who can gain the respect of faculty and simultaneously engage successfully business, industry, military, technology and the government to create an “academic enterprise.” According to Crow and Dabars, the New American University requires academic leaders who can re-orient from exclusivity to inclusivity and from elitism to public service.

From where is the next generation leader going to come? Who will simultaneously embrace technology in new ways, become more student-centric than faculty-focused and find creative ways to raise revenue beyond the traditional tuition/state support/philanthropy model? It is precisely here that Crow and Dabars are silent. This silence permits vulnerability in the model, as a particular type of leadership is so fundamental to the success of the New American University.

Designing the New American University is best judged as a provocative and well-argued call in our own time for a recalibration of American higher education. It is a chapter in a long-running and completely unresolved narrative about the purpose of higher education in the United States. Some of the Founders concerned with education wanted this nation to break with higher learning as inherited from English Oxbridge. That model represented an elite undergraduate residential community that prided itself

46. CROW & DABARS, *supra* note 3, at 204.

on its removal from daily life of the masses. The leadership in colleges at that time rejected arguments for a more useful and societally engaged college and settled back comfortably into the British model. Arguably far too many liberal arts colleges suffer today a deflated value proposition with the public because of the early decision to reject links between a liberal arts course of study and wider societal application. Crow and Dabars, in contrast, call for research universities to embrace a recalibrated liberal education accessible to larger segments of the citizenship. In so doing, universities would address the practical challenges of advancing a nation and the world to solve their shared societal challenges to which, argue Crow and Dabars, research universities are most ably suited. The New American University is the latest bold and meticulously argued model to reclaim what is distinctively American in higher education.