

Public universities are not as “public” as they used to be

In our daily reading, we ran across several articles that discussed admission at Ivy League Colleges and their peer institutions elsewhere in the country. In an opinion column in the Washington Post, Helaine Olen wrote, “College admissions at the elite level have gotten ever more competitive. A quarter of a century ago, Harvard accepted 10.9 percent of its applicants. By 2007, when the New York Times headlined its ‘brutally low acceptance rates,’ it fell to 9 percent. It’s now below 5 percent and has declined steadily.

“Here’s a suggestion: Harvard should use part of its \$41.9 billion endowment to admit more students — and lots of them. Other elite schools should consider doing the same. Doing so would allow them to take in significantly more lower-income and minority students” (<https://tinyurl.com/ubvvu39a>).

A similarly focused column by David Kirp in the New York Times (<https://tinyurl.com/cazw98z5>) went even further suggesting that top private universities “should open a new campus.” He went on to write, “Harvard-San Diego, Yale-Houston — this idea is not simply off the table in academe. It is not even within the realm of these universities’ imagination. But why should it boggle the mind? If Yale can open a campus in Singapore, why can’t it start one in Houston?”

That got us thinking about our own college experiences in the early 1960s.

As soon as he was old enough to leave the house and follow his father around the farm, Daryll wanted to be a farmer. By the time he was 8 and weighed enough to stand on the 8N Ford tractor clutch so he could shift gears, farming was in his blood. Within a couple of years, he was the one who winrowed all the oats ahead of the combine and raked all the oat straw ahead of the baler. (This was a time when Iowa farmers typically used 5 year-crop-rotations so 20 percent of crop acres produced oats for livestock feed and straw for bedding). The 8N was soon replaced with an IH Super H equipped with a two-row cultivator so he could join his Dad’s four-row outfit in the corn and soybean fields.

Following high school graduation, he began working on the farm full-time. When the cold Iowa winter closed in and farming chores were fewer, he decided to take a winter-quarter Farm Operation program offered by Iowa State University for youth who were planning on a career in farming. The program included the College of Agriculture’s basic courses in agronomy, plant science, livestock husbandry and agricultural engineering.

The Ag. Econ. Department head, Ray Beneke, thought he saw potential in this young kid. Before the winter-quarter program was finished, Daryll was signed up as a full-time student.

Beneke was a neighbor and friend of Earl Heady, Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development. Long story short, over the next 10 years Daryll completed a BS in the Farm Operations Department and PhD in economics under Heady debt free—debt free because of low tuition and university work opportunities, but primarily because of low tuition and fees.

Harwood grew up in the suburban community of Fairborn outside of Dayton, Ohio where many of his closest friends were farm kids, so he sort of learned about farming second hand. He had also decided to become a minister in the United Church of Christ where 2/3 of the churches are located in rural areas.

When it came to college, he only applied to one school, The Ohio State University, because as an Ohio high school graduate he was guaranteed admission. In those days full-time tuition was \$330 for three quarters (330 times the minimum wage of \$1.00 an hour—we will talk about that in a little bit). Because he loved mathematics he wanted to major in math, and because he expected to live in rural farming areas, he wanted a double major in agronomy. That was not to be because the graduation requirements of the Agricultural College and the College of Arts and Sciences were different and agronomy courses could not serve as electives in his A&S mathematics degree. He chose math but never forgot about agriculture.

Four years later, he earned his Master of Divinity degree and soon was living in Hudson, Kansas, a community of 185 in Central Kansas just south of the great bend of the Arkansas (pronounced Are-Kansas) River where he learned the practical side of agronomy, animal science, agricultural economics, and agricultural policy (remember The Great Russian Grain Deal and Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz). Following 30 years of parish work he began his work at the Agricultural Policy Analysis Center then located at the University of Tennessee—a Land Grant institution—where he earned an MSc in Agricultural Economics and a PhD in Sociology.

We share our stories because we have deep roots in the system of Land Grant Colleges and Universities and want to reflect on the current mission of Land Grants similar to the reflections on the Ivies and other elite colleges we referred to at the beginning of this column.

When Harwood went back to his 50th anniversary reunion at The Ohio State University, he was appalled when the University President bragged about how hard it was to get into OSU and their low acceptance rate of applicants for the prior fall term. Harwood thought that the primary mission of the state Land Grant was to educate the youth and interested adults of the state in which they are located—that's our first point.

Second, in the early 1960s, a year's full-time tuition at OSU (for 12 or more hours a term) was 330 times the Federal minimum wage of \$1.00. Today, the Federal minimum wage is \$7.25. That would set an annual tuition marker of \$2,392 a year at the present time. No matter how you calculate it, attendance at a public college should be affordable or even free like elementary and high school.

Third, the purpose of a Land Grant is to provide a service to the residents of the state in which it is located. We remember when agronomists developed new seed varieties and made them available as public varieties to a system of local seed producers rather than one of the dominant international seed companies. The cost to the farmer was the cost of the seed production by the local dealer and there was no patent to prevent farmers from using saved seeds.

With the writing of our first column in July 2000 and in the Land Grant spirit, we decided that we would not copyright it, but release it into the public domain so that it could help those interested in agricultural policy. Our only requirement was that we be acknowledged as the authors. We have continued that policy in retirement.

Fourth, state governments must step up and fully fund the educational and basic research functions of their respective Land Grant institutions. One of the reasons we have seen tuition hikes is the failure of Federal and state governments to provide their share of educational costs for students attending Land Grants and other state institutions of higher education.

From our perspective Land Grants are not like other institutions of higher education, they are held to a higher standard of responsibility. They are as essential as public elementary, middle, and high schools. Other state institutions of higher education have a role to play, but Land Grants have a singular set of responsibilities.

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