



Higher Education

and the

American

Exper

**Community,
Democracy, and
New Frontiers**

By Anita Blumenthal

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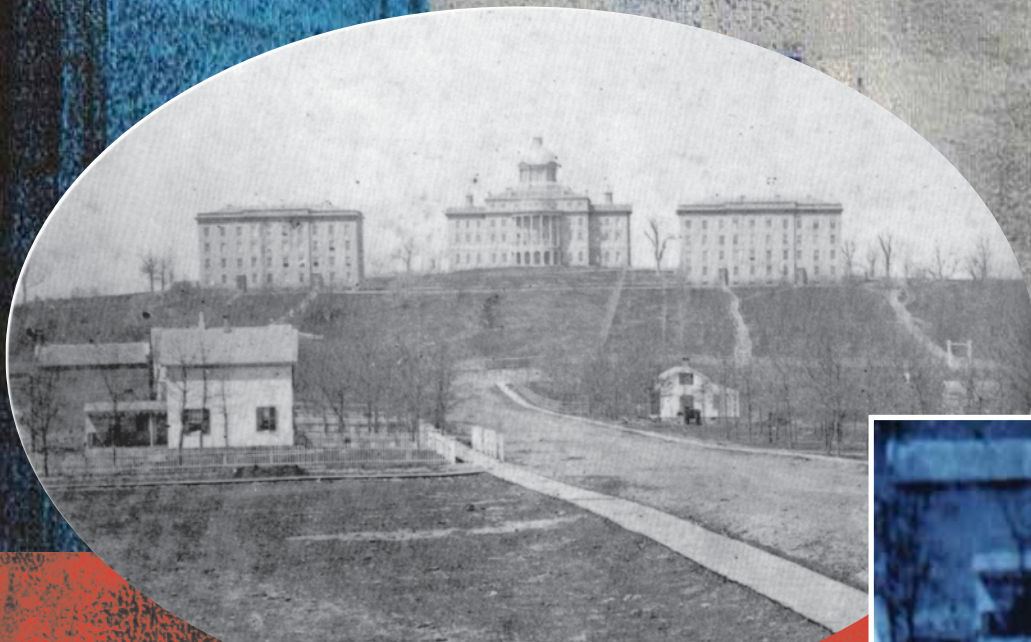
Professor Jeremi Suri, University of Texas Austin, spoke on the history of American higher education in his keynote address at the APPA 2014 conference.

The land and the built environment of America's colleges and universities have always meant far more than just the physical fabric; they have been both a source and a mirror of the unique features of American history and society, according to Dr. Jeremi Suri, the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs and professor of history, public policy, and global leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. At a plenary session at APPA's Centennial Conference in July 2014, Suri traced the unique history of higher education in the United States, and he challenged the audience to find ways to enhance the distinct contributions and ethos of American universities while meeting new challenges with fresh ideas and practical innovations. He noted repeatedly that the facilities management component of universities would have to do much of the heavy lifting.

"Universities as we know them are manifestations of our democracy as well as promoters of our democracy," he said. The experience of public higher education reflects the American experience, he explained, and what made American society—and universities—so different from those of other countries was the physical, psychological, and philosophical role of the frontier. Suri cited Frederick Jackson Turner, a major thinker about American democracy in the late 19th century, who said that American society was formed on the frontier. Above all, the frontier represented the ability to start over. "You are not defined by your family or background but by what you do in the open space to make your way," Suri said, and you do not do it alone; you do it in a community, working together. (This rich promise, he admitted, didn't apply to some populations, such as slaves or American Indians.)

RECREATING THE PROMISE OF THE FRONTIER

This frontier ethos and promise applied to the many colleges and universities that were being founded in the 19th century, Suri explained. Many were founded literally along the frontier, in places that were not yet settled. Their origins were in the openness of new space, and they shared that sense of infinite possibility. In fact, Suri said, "Universities were formed as built environments before they were educational institutions. The buildings preceded the students—they structured the students." This was the perfect example of "If you build it, they will come."



The growing campus in the late 1800s. Left, University of Wisconsin Madison, below, University of Texas Austin.



And they did come. The settlers wanted a university. “Settlers wanted a place to go to learn to be better farmers, so they could manage their communities better, so they could read Shakespeare, so they could be civilized,” Suri said.

Reflecting the community component of the frontier experience, these frontier institutions were residential, unlike the European model. The buildings recreated a frontier mentality. “The idea of an American university is that you were not creating gentlemen; you were creating pioneering citizens,” Suri said, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together into a community to discuss important matters, working together to make their way forward. This residential component also meant that the physical place and identification with that place mattered from the start.

How did these institutions come about? As the new republic grew, two facts worked together. First, there was state and federal—and popular—support for public higher education, and second, both state and federal governments had more land

than money and thus could supply one but not the other. The country had—and still has—a plenitude of land. As early as 1785, the Georgia state assembly created the land-grant model: It allocated 40,000 acres to build the nation’s first public university. The land was not to be built on; rather it was to be sold, and the money from the sale endowed the university. That is, it paid for the property and buildings.

Other states followed suit. The federal government adopted the model when, in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln signed the Land Grant College Act of 1862, known as the Morrill Act, a landmark of enlightened legislation, which granted 30,000 acres of federal land to every state, to be sold to endow a university.

TRANSFORMATION: THE GI BILL AND BEYOND

“Universities were for productive gain and intellectual advancement,” Suri said. “If you want to understand our prosperity, it’s because universities have opened their doors in our society to more people than any other society.” And it was the federal government’s commitment, in another piece of landmark legislation, that made this opening of doors possible on an unprecedented scale. In the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill), the federal government committed to provide every veteran with a college education if they wished. This bill and its iterations over the years transformed universities and transformed the country.

And now, Suri noted, universities are of a size and scale unimaginable even 60 years ago. The challenge is how, with all these changes, to ensure that the unique ethos and values of the past inform the future in innovative ways. “And you,” he told the APPA audience, “will have to figure out how to do this.” He listed a few of the issues:

Improve public access. The populist component of universities is that they were designed to be accessible and open. “We forget this when we build walls around them.” We need to make campuses more public and accessible again—and not just for alumni and sports fans. An overwhelming problem is that there is no place to park. “That’s killing us,” Suri said. “We need people...If they can’t come onto campus, they don’t know what we are about...We should make the campus a frontier for everyone.”

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Improve the research environment. At the core of being populist and pragmatic is research. This is not just about isolated labs, Suri said, but about what the university does to bring things to others in society to make their lives better. “That, more than anything else, drives our economy,” he said. One example he gave of research that improves lives was that of Harry Steenbock, a professor and scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Until the 1920s, large numbers of American children died due to bone deficiencies from lack of vitamin D. But in 1923, Steenbock invented the process of using ultraviolet light to add vitamin D to milk and other products, thus almost single-handedly ending the scourge of rickets in our society.

After World War II, in addition to funding much scientific research, the federal government created centers at universities for research on international affairs. University centers produced new knowledge, language capacity, area studies, and leaders. “We need our campuses to encourage more research...by creating better research environments,” Suri said (another facilities challenge, he noted).

Expand reach—and outreach—but retain community. Universities have always been pragmatic, he said, training people to do real-world things, and they have been a place of higher thought

for purpose in society. Outreach has traditionally been important, including extension services, correspondence courses, and professional development. Distance learning is the latest addition to this list, though it poses great challenges. Although more students need to get educated than ever before, Suri stressed that they need to do this as part of a community. That community has to be reinvented, he admitted, but it still has to be community.

He also noted that the traditional residential model, which created community, also developed civility, something sadly lacking today. “You learn civility in an environment where you are forced to engage viewpoints you hotly disagree with, but with people you have to live with at the same time,” he said, “and people you come to respect even though you may not agree with them.” Both community and civility need to be



Pioneering citizens needed to be “settler intellectuals” to promote expansion and progress.

The modern campus today; UT Austin, right, and UW Madison, below.



renewed and reinforced, even if today there's less of the traditional residential experience, Suri said. He wants to see universities create all kinds of experiences for people outside the classroom—book discussions, speakers, things that bring people together—and to create spaces to encourage that.

COOL NEIGHBOR—AND CLOSED EMPIRE

In recent years, a paradox has emerged. On the one hand, the physical growth of universities means that, instead of being separate, on the outskirts of town, they are now embedded in

the city and infuse the city with their energy. Universities are part of contemporary urbanism. These are “knowledge cities...cool places to live,” Suri said, with knowledge workers who create spin-offs and with great entertainment and restaurants. People like to live in these cities that are “inordinately complex and messy in ways that are stimulating for all of us,” he said.

But on the other hand, the universities themselves have become victims of their own success. “Turner said we became democratic citizens because we left empire and had to pioneer a new space. Now, our huge universities are empires in their own right. Instead of a university sitting in a larger society, it's an empire closed off to a lot that goes on around it,” said Suri. “Though our connections to the public are deeper than ever, our central operating



principles are self-reflective, narcissistic, and focus on who we are. To be successful as a built environment, a research environment, and a teaching campus, we need to recreate the frontier, break down the silos, bureaucracy, and stratification. We need to create more spontaneity, more of the virtues of smallness, while being as being as big as we are.”

Suri suggested that faculty and administration need to connect more. “We need to ensure that what is happening at universities is always experimental and spontaneous,” he said. We can’t be locked into old ways—a certain system for parking, a certain way to use buildings despite huge changes in technology or subjects. “We don’t study history just to replay the past,” he said, “but to think about alternative ways of doing what we do.”

Institutions need to develop more public spaces, more spaces for faculty to interact with students and with peers, and even, if possible, less space given to private faculty offices. Suri admitted that the changes that are needed are more likely to be accepted if new hires in both faculty and administration deeply understand the mission of the university and are more amenable to these new approaches. “You will be the ones who will figure this out,” he told the APPA audience.

MANAGING TO THE MISSION

The biggest need for APPA and its members, he said, is to train leaders who are not just technically competent, but who also understand the university’s mission—what it’s about. The people who manage day-to-day affairs must have this depth of understanding, not just the presidents. “Remember these values, find ways to achieve them effectively, focus on the few issues that will accomplish more, rather than trying to do everything,” Suri said. “And make sure your bosses know you cannot do everything.”

“American society will remain great if our universities continue to be frontiers for immigrants and strivers,” he said. “Everything we do has to be about creating new frontiers.” Very few people have a bird’s-eye view of what the university is about. It falls to you to

create the environment; you have to integrate the faculty, labs, and classrooms to work together. “You will build the frontiers,” Suri concluded. “You will build the pathways to them, and you will move people along them. I thank you for all you do.”

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