



John Adams, University of Minnesota Professor Emeritus

Minnesota can and must improve higher ed outcomes

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public-Policy Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

University of Minnesota Emeritus Professor John Adams believes Minnesota must continue to keep improving the outcomes of higher education, given the exceptional resources that are invested and the important stakes for students and for the state. He says those who work for our colleges and universities must take serious steps toward *owning the higher education enterprise*, rather than merely punching a time clock. He points to a significant difference between faculty members who believed "they *were* the University" and those who believed and acted as though "they merely *worked* at the University."

He discusses the importance of the mission of every college or university, saying the mission comes first. He states that a major obstacle to carrying out that mission is *careerism* on the part of faculty members, which generally means they are not dedicated to the vocation of teaching. Those faculty members can usually be counted on to do what's good for themselves, rather than to support their institution's mission. He adds that careerism tends to pull people away from working on local and state issues.

Adams lists some of the problems of higher education, including high costs, high student debt, the need for remedial classes for students not ready for college work, student drop-out rates, graduates finding and keeping a satisfactory job after they leave school and lack of understanding that some students who enter college should, instead, have moved into a vocational-technical program.

He lays out five challenges higher education institutions must strive to meet: (1) strengthening the various departments of universities; (2) finding and developing effective leadership; (3) realigning the merit-recognition and rewards system for faculty members; (4) improving the training of graduate students; and (5) helping faculty members to grow professionally through continuing professional education.

Biography

John S. Adams is an emeritus faculty member at the University of Minnesota, both in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and the geography department. He researches issues relating to North American cities, urban housing markets and housing policy, and regional economic development in the United States and the former Soviet Union. He has been a National Science Foundation Research Fellow at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California at Berkeley, and economic geographer in residence at the Bank of America world headquarters in San Francisco.

Adams was senior Fulbright Lecturer at the Institute for Raumordnung at the Economic University in Vienna and was on the geography faculty of Moscow State University. He has taught at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Washington and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His most recent book, *Minneapolis-St. Paul: People, Place, and Public Life*, looks at the region's growth and at what factors may affect the metropolitan area's future.

Adams holds a doctorate in urban geography from the University of Minnesota and two degrees in economics.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed University of Minnesota Emeritus Professor John Adams to learn about ways to improve the functioning of Minnesota higher education and to understand what barriers might prevent those institutions from contributing more to finding solutions to Minnesota's state and local policy problems.

Discussion

Those who work for our colleges and universities must take serious steps toward *owning the higher education enterprise*, instead of merely punching a time clock. University of Minnesota (U of M) Emeritus Professor John Adams said there is a significant difference between faculty members who believed "they *were* the University" and those who believed and acted as though "they merely *worked* at the University."

Adams listed what he called the "usual complaints" about higher education:

- College costs too much.

- Student debt is too high. The New York Federal Reserve Bank estimates total student debt at \$1 trillion, or more than \$24,000 per debtor—most of it federal student loan debt.
- Students are often unprepared for college-level work. Adams said these students need remedial work, which delays graduation, while adding to college expense. Several years ago, Minnesota State (formerly MnSCU) estimated that over 20 percent of its instructional budget is for remedial high school courses.
- Students often drop out before they earn a degree or certificate.
- Those who finally graduate often take five to eight years to do so.
- Graduates have trouble finding a satisfactory job after they get out and have trouble keeping it. Adams noted that (1) Employers say too many young people at age 25 still lack the soft skills that support successful employment, such as showing up on time, being drug-free, committing to the mission of the organization and then doing what needs to be done; (2) Employers say many young people are unprepared, immature and can't follow instructions; and (3) Many young people are self-absorbed and unengaged in civic life.

"These are things that can be affected by what we learn in school," Adams said.

- Many students who drop out of high school or graduate and enter college should, instead, have headed toward a vocational-technical program.

Adams pointed to several recent books that address how higher education is falling short:

- *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011) by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa. The authors said large numbers of students make it through college with minimal exposure to challenging coursework.
- *The Fall of the Faculty & Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (2011) by Benjamin Ginsberg. The author maintains that as faculty members become careerists with identities based on their research, they disdain doing local service and administrative tasks. So as academia has become more complicated, others must be hired to do it.
- *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (2015) by Leonard Cassuto. The author argues that teaching is where reforming graduate school must begin, because professors rarely prepare graduate students for the jobs they'll get in the real world.
- *The Future of Enrollment: Where Colleges Will Find Their Next Students* (2017), a report of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, by Jeffrey J. Selingo. The report explores three major trends that are reshaping our colleges and universities: (1) shifting student demographics; (2) changing migration patterns; and (3) an evolving admissions function, heavily weighted by financial considerations on the part of the schools.

Colleges and universities have a net-revenue-per-student challenge. Adams said this challenge takes center stage, because most colleges and universities can't seem to manage either their fixed costs or their variable costs.

One response, he said, has been hiring adjuncts and paying them \$3,000 or \$4,000 per course to replace a retiring professor being paid \$150,000 to teach four courses. Some people say that's exploiting the adjuncts. Instead, Adams argued, it probably reflects either overpaying the professor or, more likely, a failure by management to get suitable value for the compensation provided the professor. He asked how adjuncts could take ownership of the university where they teach.

One way into the higher education problems is to start with the basics. Adams said every college or university has a well-defined mission. He said towards the end of his career at the U of M, he would address meetings of new faculty hires by saying, "We didn't recruit you to the University to provide you with an interesting place to pursue your career with a personally rewarding job. No, we hired you to carry out the mission of the University." A number of the new faculty members seemed puzzled by his statement.

Colleges and universities are complex organizations and they can, and often do, go off track. Adams said organization theory says that once the *mission* is specified, an *organizational structure* is put into place and *authority* is distributed to be used to support the mission. Then *resources* are supplied to fuel the organization and to serve its mission.

When a system finds itself stressed, he said, it's common to focus on one of these four aspects and often to go after the wrong one. For example, Adams said, higher education institutions often plead for more resources. But the real problem is that the manager is misdirecting resources to the wrong or unproductive purposes. So, it's not a resource problem, it's a management problem.

The mission comes first. Adams noted that the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 expanded the mission of existing higher education institutions and added new institutions across the country. The mission of the new institutions was to focus on the teaching of practical agriculture, science, military science and engineering, without excluding classical studies. He said the new "land grant mission" was in contrast to, but augmented, the historic practice of higher education's focus on an abstract liberal arts curriculum.

Universities today, including the U of M, are continually pulled in four different directions:

1. Preserving reliable knowledge from the past and passing it on to today's students and the public;
2. Pursuing basic research and scholarly inquiry;
3. Carrying out applied research on contemporary problems; and
4. Preparing young people for citizenship and for entry into the economy with the appropriate knowledge and skills they'll need for gainful employment.

After World War II, Adams said, the federal government assumed responsibility for putting money into research universities. That led to many academics working at cross-purposes to the mission. "Things drifted away from the mission," he said.

The Carnegie Classification of 4,400 postsecondary schools in the U.S. ranks schools in seven categories, top to bottom:

1. Doctorate-granting universities;
2. Master's colleges and universities;
3. Baccalaureate colleges;
4. Associates colleges, where certificates or associate degrees are the main business;
5. Special-focus institutions, such as free-standing law schools or seminaries;
6. Tribal colleges—schools that belong to the American Indian Higher Education consortium; and
7. Not classified group, which includes 26 schools that don't fit any of the six groups above.

Adams said this layout is an obvious hierarchy and matches the sense of rank held by many inside and outside of academia. That leads academics trying to reach the top-ranked schools to a sense of careerism, rather than dedication to the vocation of teaching. He said it also leads to mission creep, with baccalaureate colleges adding master's degree programs, community colleges moving to offer bachelor's degrees or vocational-technical colleges trying to get into the bachelor's degree business.

"These dynamics are hurting our state by failing to meet the education and training needs of many of our young people," he said.

On the demand side of higher education, students want good jobs after graduation; on the supply side, how well are faculty members' professional ambitions and their daily time allocations aligned with the stated university mission? Adams asked that question and said there are four things that affect faculty time allocations: (1) what faculty members are *expected* to do, given the university's mission; (2) what they *enjoy* doing, given their personal tastes; (3) what they're *recognized* and *rewarded* for doing, given the merit criteria of their university and of their discipline or professional field; and (4) what they're individually *suit*ed to do, given their personalities, talents, interests and skills.

"It's no wonder many faculty members get lost in the weeds, often feeling lonely, overwhelmed or underappreciated," Adams said.

A first challenge is to strengthen the departments of universities. Adams said strong universities are built upon strong departments, in terms of their *efficiency* in using resources, their *effectiveness* in carrying out the mission, and in their *culture* in providing an agreeable, supportive place to work.

He said a productive department requires four attributes: (1) genuine teamwork; (2) effective leadership; (3) sound management; and (4) capable administration. "And I'm sorry to say that in the world of academia I inhabited for four decades, we didn't do well on any of the four," he said.

A second challenge is finding and developing effective leadership. "An effective leader in a department, center, program or lab," Adams said, "knows how to allocate—and reallocate—money, materials, personnel time, effort or energy to serve the unit's mission and then does it." He said that

higher education culture being what it is, it's hard to realign efforts and reallocate resources that have outlived their usefulness, to modify or kill projects that have gone off track, or to rescue those lost in the weeds.

A major obstacle, he said, is *careerism* on the part of some faculty members, which can sometimes work at cross-purposes to devotion to mission at the unit level. These faculty members can usually be counted on to do what's good for themselves and their career. They largely ignore what may be needed from them to support the team's effort in meeting all parts of the mission. "Behavior like this can be and usually is corrosive to team morale," Adams said.

A third challenge is the merit-recognition and rewards system. "We could, if we decided to do so, align rewards and recognition with the mission, while remembering that rewards aren't just monetary," Adams said.

Fourth is the graduate school challenge. Adams said if universities would train graduate students for the jobs they will have, it would encourage professors to examine their own values, behaviors and patterns in their use of time.

A fifth challenge is continuing professional education. Adams said higher education is the only learned profession that lacks any requirement for continuing professional education and training, unlike engineers, architects, psychologists, medical personnel, etc. "We have to help faculty members to grow professionally, to think and to learn," he said. It's important for them to improve their own specialties, to develop new specialties and to get to know the present and future higher education landscape, especially if they are headed toward greater leadership responsibilities.

Adams named five ways to improve Minnesota's higher education industry and that of the country as a whole:

1. Identify potential leadership and administrative talent early and train local talent to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources.
2. Align the recognition and reward systems with the mission.
3. Get rid of the one-size-fits-all job descriptions for faculty members.
4. Overcome the persistent bias against vocational-technical education and training.
5. Make it easier for high school sophomores, juniors and seniors who are not college-bound, for whatever reasons, to learn about and take advantage of **Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO)** , a state program that allows high school students—at no cost to them—to take college classes for credit.

When money starts to guide people, then the University's community mission takes a back seat. Adams made that remark in response to an interviewer's concern about public higher education institutions in Minnesota and their relationships with K-12 public schools. The interviewer noted that the University of Southern California (USC) had adopted a high school.

"When higher ed institutions here go to the Legislature seeking appropriations, there's seldom any mention about how they plan to build relationships with the public schools," the interviewer said. "Those schools are the source of their future students, but they do little to develop that pipeline. No one at the Legislature—or anybody else—raises questions about that."

Adams said careerism is to blame. "If the faculty owned the University, it would be different," he said. He noted that the former University High School, located in Minneapolis near the U of M campus, had a big teacher-training institution before the Legislature created the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU—now known as Minnesota State). "Other issues intruded, like professors' identity," Adams said. "When money starts to guide people, then the University's community mission takes a back seat."

Another interviewer corroborated Adam's opinion on the demise of University High School. "We lost a place that had provided a setting for graduate students to do their Ph.D. research," the interviewer said. "Where can research on education be done now in a real setting?"

Adams said that the University is doing some work on how to connect high schools to the research function. "Why are we paying high schools to educate kids *and* paying Minnesota State to do remedial work for kids coming to the universities who aren't ready to do college work? Why are we paying twice? Instead of bellyaching that kids aren't ready for college, we need to figure out how to fix it."

The University has definitely relinquished its high standing among academic institutions around the country. Has it tipped too far to ever come back? An interviewer made that remark and asked the question. "What is the impact of that?" the interviewer asked. "The professional schools are not at the top of the rankings."

Adams said that Bob Holt from the University did an analysis of the changing rankings of research universities in the country since the 1920s. There is a steady decline in the rankings of public research universities, like the University of Minnesota. In the 1920s, Adams said, among the top research universities in the U.S. were several Big Ten schools: the University of Michigan, University of Illinois, University of Wisconsin and University of Minnesota. "It's been a challenge for the University of Minnesota to hang onto its ranking," he said.

He said the rankings depend on research programs, not the professional schools. "On that front, the U of M's ranking has gone down," he said. "We've slipped; we could do better."

"Should the U of M be trying to improve things?" the interviewer asked.

"The University's Regents are aware that something has to be done and that they need to hold senior leadership accountable," Adams replied. "Higher-ranked places are a magnet for talent. It's important to our state."

Adams noted that competitiveness is not well understood. "If a place is able to maintain its respective position in the country, it can reallocate its resources," he said. "If a place is losing its position, like Duluth and St. Louis, it has fewer choices."

How can we achieve good classroom teaching and learning for undergraduates? And what's the measure of success? An interviewer asked those questions and said there aren't mentors to help faculty learn how to teach.

"When I was at the University, I thought people could be taught to improve their teaching, even though they're reluctant to be told how to do it," Adams responded. "But there's no incentive to improve teaching. It's different in private colleges. They monitor what's going on in the classroom and they let people go if they're not effective teachers."

There's no conflict between doing things for our state and making a broader contribution.

Adams made that statement in response to an interviewer's comment that there is competition at the University between the pursuit of a national agenda for research versus what the state might say needs to be done. Adams said it's important to note that, over the years, people at the University have made major contributions to the state and beyond:

- The Department of Psychology developed the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), a psychological test that assesses personality traits and psychopathology.
- The Agriculture Department developed new varieties of apples.
- The Department of Chemical Engineering worked on taconite.
- University Professor Judith Martin spent years working on the Mississippi River.

"That's our job," Adams said. "If it's part of your job, you just do it. There's no reason why not to do it. But there's a tendency for careerism to pull people away from local and state issues. It doesn't occur to some faculty members. They can't think how to bridge to the state."

Sports and student housing are taking precedence at the University. Adams made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that buildings are going up to pursue the University's agenda of the being the best performers in sports and in the quality of student housing. Adams said you can't ignore the fact that some of the major supporters of the University are sports fans. "But we shouldn't let that overwhelm the University's mission," he said.

On the issue of building more luxurious student housing, Adams said a lot of kids can't imagine sharing a bedroom or sharing a housing unit with three other people. "Some students think they need a flat-screen TV in their rooms," he said, noting that housing is the first thing prospective students and their parents ask about on tours of the University.

There's no one answer to what we should do. Adams made that remark and said we must start inside the organization. He noted that when he taught at West Point for a year, the superintendent of the school would talk constantly about its mission.

What could a governor do? An interviewer asked that question and said that when he worked in House Research at the Legislature, he learned that the University is essentially a fourth branch of government in the state. Adams responded that in the first place, you have to decide what business you're in and how things work. He said Gov. Mark Dayton has a decent set of values, but hasn't been

able to articulate them. "If the governor is able to articulate what we really want the University to do, he or she can point a compass direction," he said.

Another interviewer agreed. He said the governor has the bully pulpit and a budget, and can articulate a state agenda of things he or she would like to see higher education do and how it can be of service to this state.

How often have we had leadership at a university that tries to follow its mission?

An interviewer asked that question and Adams pointed to Purdue University, whose new president, Mitch Daniels, Jr., is the former governor of Indiana. Adams said Daniels has captured the public's imagination about how to make Indiana work better in agriculture, business and other sectors. Adams noted that Purdue is buying Kaplan, a national for-profit college-test-training firm, in order to improve the university's online program so it can supplement its classroom program.

"All presidents try hard to lead their institutions to follow their stated missions—and they deserve our understanding and support," Adams said. "But major public research universities like the University of Minnesota are incredibly complex organizations, in which internal structures, lines of authority, faculty and staff incentives, leadership and managerial skills in colleges and departments, and the allocation of resources can sometimes overwhelm the most dedicated and skilled leaders."

"Yet," he continued, "despite these formidable challenges, we have to keep trying to improve the outcomes, given the exceptional resources that are invested and the important stakes for students and for our state."