

CHRISTIAN K. ANDERSON AND ROGER L. WILLIAMS

## INTRODUCTION

*Where the Public Research University Has Been, Where It Is,  
and Where It Is Going*

For the past half-century, the American public research university has been a decisive force in shaping American society. Its development in the first half of the 20th century was precursive of the astounding contributions this institution would make to science, technology, culture, and our understanding of the human condition in the second half of the century. With that backdrop in mind, this volume examines the role of the American public research university in the decades ahead, respecting the past but focusing on its uncertain future. In chapter 8 of this volume, Judith A. Ramaley asks, “How might scholarship change in order to link theory and utility?” She proposes that research be integrated to advance understanding *and* to solve practical problems. It is our hope that this book accomplishes this goal by advancing our scholarly understanding of the roles and functions of the public research university while also giving university leaders and policymakers the information and insight necessary to address that indeterminate future.

This volume is the scholarly outpouring from a symposium held at The Pennsylvania State University on February 25–26, 2005, on “The Future of the American Public Research University.” Conducted as the capstone of the University’s sesquicentennial celebration (Penn State was chartered February 22, 1855), the symposium attracted more than 200 participants from more than 40 institutions of higher education from across the United States and beyond to discuss the current status and challenges of the American public research university and the opportunities it faces on the road ahead.

This introductory chapter draws on the remarks of the keynote speakers at the symposium: Nils Hasselmo, Richard T. Ingram, Stanley O. Ikenberry, and Graham B. Spanier.<sup>1</sup> These thoughtful leaders provided an assessment of the current state of public research universities and speculation as to what lies ahead. As you will see in subsequent chapters, their remarks complemented many of the ideas discussed by the scholars who addressed the symposium.

Nils Hasselmo, president of the Association of American Universities and former president of the University of Minnesota, spoke on “Innovation in the Public Interest: The Public Research University in the 21st Century.” He highlighted the need for institutional leaders to create an environment in which innovation can thrive. Stanley O. Ikenberry, Regent Professor and President Emeritus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and former president of the American Council on Education,

warned and wondered about the future in his talk, “Shifting, Drifting Sands: The Uncertain Future of Public Research Universities.” Richard T. Ingram, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, asked “Are Citizen Governing Boards Up to the Task in the Modern Public Research University?” His talk addressed the critical role of boards of trustees and the need for reform in the future selection of board members. Graham B. Spanier, president of The Pennsylvania State University and former Chair of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, remarked on the changing demographics and public good that is higher education in his talk, “A Legacy at Risk: Public Research Universities at the Crossroads.”

These leaders praised the advances brought forth by the public research university but also worried aloud about its future. Although the public research university is one of the nation’s great assets, serving the country through its mission of teaching, research, and service, it also faces myriad challenges: access for underrepresented populations, rising costs and soaring tuitions, and the evolving debate over whether higher education is a public good or private gain.

The U.S. has 166 public research universities (of more than 4,000 total institutions of higher education). Yet these 166 institutions—about 4% of the institutions in the U.S.—teach more than 3 million, about 20%, of the 15 million students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. (Total public four-year college and university attendance is about 6.2 million.) American research universities produce the vast majority of Ph.D.s, physicians, lawyers, and other professionals.

The research produced by public research universities is astounding. They account for nearly 70% of all research spending in American higher education (more than \$24.5 billion of \$36 billion in 2004). Research at public research universities has resulted in numerous innovations and products, from artificial hearts to the compact disc to the field ion microscope to innumerable other inventions in every field of science and technology. And the technology developed at public research universities is increasingly transferred into the private sector, creating jobs and generating tax revenue for states and communities. In addition, the economic impact of public research universities is enormous. For example, the economic impact of Penn State on its sponsoring state economy is \$6.1 billion, making it, far and away, the largest economic engine in Pennsylvania. Outreach operations by these institutions touch millions of lives through various programs and services.

Despite these contributions, the future of the American public research university is uncertain at best. Stanley Ikenberry sees:

. . . at least two somewhat contradictory futures. One is bright, and with all its challenges, the one I see most clearly. That future acknowledges higher education at the pinnacle of America’s educational ladder. It understands Americans believe in education and understand the benefits of higher education; they see it as the road to personal opportunity, the key to the American Dream. To a lesser degree they also see colleges and research universities as a solution to many of society’s problems and the wellspring of innovation and creativity, the foundation for economic growth and competitiveness. (Ikenberry, 2005, p. 1)