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Chaos and the New Academy

by
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—Something there is that doesn't love a wall
ROBERT FROST, 1914

What makes academic leadership so challenging?

Every day academic leaders make decisions that fly in the face of conventional management models. Rather than seeking greater efficiency and order, these leaders are guiding the institution toward high energy activity that seems chaotic and hard to direct.

Our research at leading universities and colleges shows that those who favor chaotic activity have significantly increased their institution's productivity, quality and scope. Leaders at these institutions understand that today's academy must embrace unruly intellectual passion to discover new ideas for scholarly directions and real-world engagement.

This work-in-progress explores this new model of academic leadership. Drawing on metaphors from other disciplines and successful examples of the "ordered disorder" principle, we suggest some ways leaders can use specific practices to achieve the gains we describe. We welcome your comments and suggestions to Susan Frost at sfrost@susanfrostconsulting.com.

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Chaos *and the* New Academy

In "Mending Wall," a poem about two neighbors repairing a stone fence they share, Robert Frost's persona reflects: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out." Written on the eve of World War I, the poem invites serious questions about the nature of a wall, both a small wall shared by neighbors and a wall so monumental that it can divide and contain world powers. Certain that there is *something* that does not love a wall—something exceptional, something rare—Frost wonders about the value of imposed boundaries. When his neighbor insists that "good fences make good neighbors," Frost is not so sure. What is the danger of walling something out—of separating entities, ideas, lives? Fences may guard against chaos by imposing a border. But, in warding off chaos, they may wall off much more. Friendship, collaborative opportunities, shared resources, or knowledge may be lost.

Webster defines chaos as "any place or condition of total disorder or confusion." Contemporary scholars, however, understand chaos as the tendency for extraordinarily complex and unpredictable structures to emerge from the dogmatic repetition of simple rules, or—more precisely—from disorder (Gleick, 1987). Thinking about the potential of chaos, then, rather than its dangers, we ask in this article what the idea of chaos can offer leaders that the seemingly ordered management models of the last few decades have failed to provide. For the leaders of most universities, the very appearance of chaos is daunting, even if what produces it is as explicable as a mathematical formula or a cure for an ill. After all, we might ask, who among us is equipped to lead a university not *away from* chaos, but *toward* it?

As an attempt to answer these questions, this article discusses how leaders might use the notion of chaos to help their institutions advance. We challenge leaders to accept a kind of *ordered disorder* as an alternative to mending walls that would be more likely to wall out such assets as passion and knowledge than to wall them in. We draw on studies we have conducted for more than a decade featuring leading universities and colleges that have increased their quality and scope consistently despite pressures to retain the status quo. We show, for example, how leaders of outstandingly progressive institutions take specific steps to help scholars push knowledge through traditional walls despite the potential for disorder. Their action challenges the once-stark divides between disciplines in order to foster overlapping interests, new alliances, and communal support for the sometimes chaotic interactions that can lead to new ideas.

To explain the trends we see, we draw on metaphors not only from poetry, but also from geography, a field that uses such terms as frontier, global city, and even cyberspace to describe

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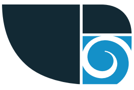


the places where people come together despite boundaries. Historically, individuals formed communities by establishing borders or staking claims in a lasting fashion. But now communities are places where people move in and out—places that are defined less by fences, or structural boundaries, and more by dynamic interaction among the members and with other communities as well. In these places, the communal dismantling of fences, stone by stone has resulted not in chaos and destruction, but rather in chaos and *construction*—the building not of walls, but of relationships that help foster new work and ideas.

The same is true of universities. Just as new cultures are redefining some communities, new forms of knowledge—and even new ways to produce that knowledge—are redefining some universities. This is especially true where scholars and leaders feel free to move in and out of marked territories in search of new ideas and methods. Scholars in these institutions, for example, are staking new claims across the sciences, arts, and humanities. While those claims do not involve new lands, they do involve pioneering theories and new connections among existing fields. They also involve discoveries about how the world functions and how to apply this knowledge to the benefit of individuals and society.

How are claims like these taking hold? The leaders and institutions that foster them seem to look with favor on chaotic activity and understand that, despite a breakdown in walls that have been maintained so carefully for so long, what emerges is, in fact, a new kind of order that contains the shapes of the future.

Global City as Cognitive Metaphor

The connection among modern conceptions of chaos, the university, and the global city grows out of earlier arguments we have made comparing the development of universities to the evolution of some cities from village to metropolis to global city (Frost & Chopp, 2004; Frost, Chopp & Pozorski, 2004).[1] There, we argue that while the village represents a close-knit enclave where stakeholders share basic values and engage in civic debate, and the metropolis is marked by a strong bureaucracy and central leadership, the global city, although not necessarily more complex, relies on networks, blurred borders, and strategic projects to move forward.

This work understands the global city as a cognitive metaphor, or an unfamiliar idea that causes one to think creatively about something familiar. Using terms of business, Tihamér von Ghyczy has observed that business leaders tend to draw lessons from other disciplines—warfare, biology, music—but do it badly. Instead of being seduced by the similarities between fields, von Ghyczy advises leaders to look for places where the metaphor breaks down (2003).

[1] Throughout this article we use the term *university* to apply to the full range of higher education institutions, from those granting doctorates to baccalaureate and community colleges.

In this article, as in the previous work, we draw on the unfamiliar idea of the global city to spark creative thinking about universities. Granted, a comparison between global cities and universities may be unexpected, especially today when such cities are associated primarily with traffic jams, racial tensions, and stark differences between rich and poor. But because the value of the cognitive metaphor is in the possibilities it opens up, one goal is to explore points of *imperfect* fit.

Because the global city is characterized by an open culture, fluid mobility, and flexible systems, we have argued that this model could benefit many universities that seem confined by unnecessary walls and rules, barricades and bureaucratic offices. The vision of universities as one type of global city emerges from the observation that the strongest institutions are defined by their cultures, which, in turn, determine the more bureaucratic aspects of everyday life such as procedures for rewarding good work, naming leaders, allotting funds, and the like. Conversely, at universities that are less akin to the global city and more closely related to the metropolis, structures are fixed. Over time, they determine the culture of the place. In other words, a university that resembles a global city privileges the essence of its mission over the strict bureaucratic arrangements and guidelines that come to define a more regularly-ordered place (Sassen, 2000).

Concentrating on new ideas and ways to encourage them serves not only to sustain the global city, but, crucially, to advance it by encouraging new claims (Sassen, 1999). In some respects, this kind of "postmodern" emphasis is not new to the academy at all. In fact, Karl Weick (1991) has described a university as a "loosely coupled system" that functions because loose relationships lead to greater independence for the parts and help the institution adapt to substantial change. Adapting to change is also Barbara Sporn's concern. Sporn has studied leaders who rely more on shared mission than executive authority to integrate the whole (1999). Rather than trying to separate the disciplines, departments or schools, those leaders blur those functional borders to help creative scholars collaborate to create new forms of knowledge.

We have argued that creative leaders begin with two assumptions. First, ideas build institutions, and the best ideas emerge from new directions within the institution rather than from external sources. Second, new developments tend to thrive when they rise out of organic growth rather than being imposed by formal structures (Frost, Chopp and Pozorski, 2003; Frost and Chopp, 2004). Now we argue that chaos provides a new way of understanding these assumptions. When we take down walls that separate one part of the university from another—discipline from discipline, faculty from leaders, research from teaching, new ideas seem freer to develop and emerge.

New Sites, New Claims

We base our ideas about the relationship between chaos and the academy on three studies that show how some universities and colleges are making new claims—both by taking down the walls and by making new discoveries. The first study draws on a qualitative examination by Susan Frost of top research universities including Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and others. Begun to reveal the university-building strategies those institutions use, the study consisted of comprehensive telephone interviews with leaders and site visits lasting several days. To set up the visits, Frost sought out leaders and scholars who seemed to be accomplishing important change and met with about twelve to twenty on each campus, face-to-face. She also tracked university-level changes at the schools that compose the Association of American Universities (AAU). Made up of the top research institutions, these 62 institutions in the U.S. and Canada set the pace for academic research in the world.

Although some consider these elite private institutions to be staid or even stale, we observed several outlooks or practices that contradict that view. The universities are taking steps to increase both their focus on strategic areas and their flexibility to act. Rather than developing academic programs incrementally or across the board, these universities have created programs to advance specific ambitions. Some, for example, are using income from patent and license activities to hurry the development of faculty research because it is promising, whether or not complex internal requirements about supporting such projects have been met. Then they use the projects to increase the distinctiveness of the entire institution, presenting it as one university as well as a collection of schools.

Additionally the leaders recognize that faculty passion rather than marketplace factors or other external drivers must underlie a new program or the program will lack sustainable strength. Scholars at several universities, for example, now compete for more kinds of seed funds to begin initiatives. With few formal restrictions, those funds encourage the trial-and-error exploration of new ideas. Once scholars take their ideas into the next phase of development, subtle structural support from the administration continues to nourish the work. We found no instance of structure leading the process. Rather than fencing in new energy and ideas, the structures we found were boosting those forces in important but almost invisible ways.

Perhaps the leaders are reacting to the fact that creative faculty members find resources to accomplish their own goals and to build interdisciplinary relationships with others. An example of this practice is a humanities council one university formed to enrich academic offerings, not simply to coordinate management of the departments. Now some of the council's ventures attract external funds to the university on their own. Of course the amount of support such a council deploys is important, but faculty ownership is its central strength.

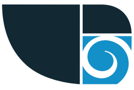
Another practice concerns reporting lines, which are less vital to strong development than personal dynamics. Like other high performing institutions, the universities we studied invest more in developing core areas directly than in articulating a comprehensive strategic plan, and they achieve their aims by emphasizing people more than organizational design. Although it can be chaotic, this form of development generates energy. The focus on individuals sustains partnerships among faculty and leaders that seem supportive and entrepreneurial at the same time.

Our second study expands this understanding of progressive practices by examining an innovative liberal arts program. Sunoikisis, a virtual classics department, offers collaborative educational programs to fourteen liberal arts colleges that belong to a consortium, the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS). With support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the consortium and the colleges founded Sunoikisis in 1995 to expand the scope and curriculum of small classics departments. A blend of on-campus teaching with inter-institutional instruction, the courses include a weekly on-line lecture from a faculty member, an on-line question-and-response session in which students share thoughts on lecture materials, and a weekly tutorial with a classicist at students' home campus.

In 2002, ACS engaged researchers to investigate strengths and weaknesses of the program to help leaders improve it as it evolves (Frost and Olsen, 2005). The study shows that Sunoikisis does offer an effective combination of intellectual interaction, dedication to liberal arts learning, and use of cutting-edge technology to advance that learning. As the first of four important gains, Sunoikisis increases the scope of classics education, accomplishing the purpose for which it was formed. Faculty and students clearly recognized the value the broader range of expertise brought to the courses and the resulting intellectual stimulation.

In addition, collaboration has led to a network that achieves more than planners set out to accomplish. Especially remarkable in a discipline that is more known for individual effort, the network is designed to help scholars blend ideas. It has influenced the way faculty have designed the program, taught the classes, and conducted research. With some humor, one respondent noted: "Basically, we [classicists] are all cave dwellers; collegial but proprietary about what should be in our courses. . . .The reading list [for the Sunoikisis course] is not what any one individual would have done…the end result was good for everyone." Describing their teaching style as seminar-like to engage the students as well as the other classicists in the virtual classroom, other respondents noted that teaching in the program also improved their teaching in more traditional classes outside Sunoikisis.

Building on collaboration across institutions, Sunoikisis produces gains for the colleges that go beyond its disciplinary span. For example, Sunoikisis has helped faculty form close professional ties, not across one campus, but across fourteen campuses, and provided professional



development opportunities that each small department could not support. One respondent commented that team teaching led towards more publishable papers by "raising the bar in preparation, presentation, and thought." For their part, the students enjoyed taking more responsibility for learning. As one student said, "The professor is not intervening and telling me what to do, so it was really cool. I did things when I wanted to. Some students may have a problem with this." Like the faculty and students, leaders saw the benefits of this collaboration. Some were surprised, though, that formerly competitive colleges could collaborate so well. "I was skeptical at first," said one dean, "because we compete hard for students and for faculty. This academic collaboration allows us to improve our program, however, and I hope we can find other topics for collaboration as we move along."

And finally, Sunoikisis uses technology to blend ideas, expand interests, and enrich collaboration, rather than merely to make instruction more efficient. To reduce costs, some institutions use a technique called "unbundling," or assigning some technology-related teaching tasks to less qualified staff. Sunoikisis also unbundles some instructional components, not to reduce costs, but to allow scholars to teach in their special areas of expertise. By pooling intellectual resources, the program broadens scope without diverting faculty or students away from liberal arts approaches to learning.

A third study of progressive practices describes a cumulative project to advance Emory, a research university that has increased its national prominence steadily over the last 20 years. Leaders used two approaches to guide Emory's development from 1990 to 2003: multi-year collaborative projects for faculty and a study of strategies the faculty used to share academic work. By working more from the top down to increase faculty strength and at the same time investigating the grass roots methods the faculty devised on their own, they hoped to accelerate the rate of change the community could achieve.

The projects took three forms: a seminar series to encourage cross-disciplinary discourse, research and teaching; conversations among several hundred faculty members about major issues and how leaders might use them to help Emory evolve; and faculty-led planning committees to study the university's teaching and research missions and recommend ways to strengthen them. Although their purposes varied widely, the projects shared a few key traits. When designing the efforts, university leaders took special care to involve faculty in every step, from refining the topic to selecting the scholars to be involved. Then project leaders established a work culture that was more like an academic endeavor than an administrative exercise. They adopted a casual work style to accommodate changing schedules and irregular collaboration hours, used graduate students to manage details, and revised documents extensively to include as many points of view as possible. These practices increased the faculty's influence on the

outcomes and began the process of weaving new practices into the cultures that helped produce them.

When collaborating pushed participants to consider new methods or approaches, they worked hard to actually learn those methods and allow them to influence the project. Although some resisted at first, most persisted until they found a mutually acceptable new approach. One scholar noted that working with scholars in other disciplines had changed his professional life. “I saw it as a benchmark in my intellectual development,” he said, adding that it gave him more confidence as a teacher and citizen of the community (Frost and Jean, 2004, p. 1).

The study, which was designed to reveal successful collaborative practices, focused on intellectual initiatives and how they form and flourish in the Emory environment. They looked, for instance, at scholarly interest in religion by faculty members who were not formally in that field and at the benefits of faculty research in the university’s metropolitan area of Atlanta. These investigations showed that vibrant academic programs tend to have a problem-based mission and depend on the leadership of one or two scholars who have vision, political skill, and the ability to draw on existing collegial networks. The practices the scholars naturally developed to manage the programs tended to expand the networks as the programs evolved. Most programs had small formal structures, for example, but swept in larger numbers of collaborators to help accomplish the academic gains. Although governance practices varied, when committees rather than individuals made decisions, the programs seemed more likely to thrive (Frost et al, 2004).

Such collaborative programs not only produced collective gains, they benefited individual scholars as well. Program leaders, for example, reported that faculty who may not fit within traditional borders flourished in programs that cross those lines. Some leaders even described their program as a “refuge” for intellectual refreshment. One humanist said: “It’s just great fun . . . . People tell me that they look forward to this more than anything each week. . . . My whole academic life has been radically enhanced by the opportunity to talk with physicists and medical doctors” (Frost et al, 2004).

The three studies we have described originated separately. When we reflected on the findings, however, we were struck by certain similarities and refrains, especially the important roles played by those who navigate borders and networks well. Ultimately, opening walls that divide an institution has real effects not only on the work of leaders and scholars at these schools, but also on the outcomes they produce.

Leading toward Chaos

Our studies show that new claims arise when leaders look for hidden strengths purposefully and push them forward to evolve into something new. They know the academy can advance, for example, when apparently disorganized groups of faculty pursue all kinds of unrelated work or when unconnected coalitions of people and projects shape the future in seemingly random ways. Beneath this chaotic activity we found the quiet (or sometimes noisy) churn of productive action and a determined order that emerges, it seems, despite itself. We also found scholars who are working hard to open walls and leaders who are using those openings as assets to help the institution mature. Rather than requiring more effort, leaders are removing bureaucratic impositions to free the university and its important actors to achieve the flexibility they need. This is not to say that the leaders are discussing the merits of chaos in their planning sessions! But it *appears* as if they are, and this is what interests us. How are they moving forward? Rather than encouraging disorder directly, we believe that certain strategic exchanges are taking place.

Using Chaos, Opening Walls

The first exchange concerns leaders who decline to mend walls in favor of opening those walls in the name of academic achievement. At Sunoikisis, for example, technology makes reliance on fixed borders not only impractical, but also impossible, and so leaders exchanged fixed borders and discrete work for open borders and shared work. They underscore our previous findings that vibrant intellectual work depends more on the passions of scholars than on the structures institutions have built to organize knowledge. When those structures become confining, scholars go around or even through them to accomplish their original goals and more. Colleagues who meet when they join a network to pursue one question may go on to compete for grants in other new areas, team teach new classes, or write articles or books together. The open-ended design of the networks can produce myriad combinations of knowledge and skill.

Now we see how a leader who welcomes potentially chaotic activity can help the academy advance despite pressures to retain the status quo. A university grows when faculty and resources can circulate from department to department, center to center, and university to university. This capacity to move freely, so like that of the global city, marks a progressive institution. In global cities, people, goods, and information travel freely from one place to another—even from one continent to another. When departments share faculty, resources, and credit, they do more than exhibit attributes of the global city. When they encourage fluid exchange to replace confining borders, they become part of the global city itself.

Other gains include the symbolic value faculty assign to an institution's support for specific networks and wall-opening opportunities. Because they are accustomed to collaborating

across departments on top of their internal duties, scholars in one study gave clear credit to the institution or leader who supported their collaboration, especially when the usual evaluation metrics did not recognize those contributions. Time and opportunity to pursue questions through a new lens "purely for the sake of doing it" are two commodities scholars seek (Frost and Jean, 2004).

Pursuing work through open walls also poses potential obstacles, especially when leaders value orderly management. When we talk about the new, even diverging values of scholars, we are talking about interdisciplinary coalitions among faculty that run counter to traditional organizational models. While budgets, dates, deadlines, and other requirements drive the management of these programs, the rigor of most departmental structures is missing. A scholar's need to advance through the faculty ranks presents a special barrier because promotion and tenure rely on the judgment of one's departmental peers. When evidence of sound work is one step removed from the core, insightful decisions about its worth and importance may be harder to achieve.

Leaders as Academic Partners and Entrepreneurs

Asking how progressive leaders encourage chaos led us to a second exchange—the leader's transition from CEO to academic partner and entrepreneur. Whereas their predecessors might have functioned comfortably in a web of bureaucracy, leaders we studied allow themselves and their constituents to move freely among their areas of interest or expertise. They seem to defy observers who note frequently that presidents' roles have changed over the last 20 years to concentrate almost wholly on fundraising duties and leave little time for hands-on leadership inside the institution.

Our evidence suggests that some top leaders are not relinquishing their role as university builders, but exchanging one form of advancement for another. Now a president who once worked from the outside to build the strength of the faculty still develops the university, but more as an academic partner or entrepreneur. For example, many fundraising campaigns currently list academic programs along with buildings as fundraising targets or even replace the usual capital improvements with programs the institution hopes to fund. Our studies suggest that leaders who use a campaign to build faculty strength tend to see the bigger institutional picture, know its narrative, and communicate the story consistently.

These progressive leaders understand new claims for what they can become: forces to help faculty and students make valuable connections and contributions across the disciplines and beyond. They seem to be forming a new generation of presidents, provosts, and deans who join with entrepreneurial program leaders and other coalition-building scholars to bring together various aspects of the institution rather than allowing traditional academic structures to continue

to fence off the parts. They are challenging not the values of the academy, but the value of its structures, which have become so embedded that they have taken on the quality of a value. But more than that, using chaos successfully means recognizing that new claims can emerge only if they have the freedom to grow organically, rather than from more internally focused bureaucratic impositions. We saw this when one progressive university in our study referred to their central structures not as buildings, but as *faculties* where *people*—not the places that house them—worked deliberately and passionately together. We saw this when studying Sunoikisis, particularly with the potential vibrant connections that electronic media have to offer. And we saw this at Emory, where leaders did not require scholars to work together toward a common cause, but noticed when they *did* and supported those natural efforts.

Leaders at other institutions, however, may not use the idea of chaos to their full advantage. Although the collaborative networks we have investigated can be difficult to manage, we have seen them increase institutional prestige, advance commercial relationships, encourage new designs in teaching and learning, and introduce humanistic values into public debate. Institutions are more productive when a leader amplifies the best ideas emerging from many different directions rather than making limiting choices between competing goods.We have seen leaders use the assets we are describing to produce gains in research universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges as well. Rather than viewing new claims as a daily distraction or worse, they are using the energy those claims produce to enlarge the center to include not simply core programs, but also those programs that, until now, have remained on the margins or even more removed. In some cases, the leaders' outlooks are so different from previous generations that we believe they are encouraging a third exchange—from institution as ivory tower to institution as problem-solver with the world.

University in the World

Our third exchange involves the relationship between the academy and the larger world during a time when leaders, particularly presidents, feel pressure to translate academic work to the community, boards of directors, and donors who expect academia to solve real-world problems rather than remaining (or seeming to remain) removed from more immediate concerns. In many ways this third exchange is not new. Universities have always been aware of the need to have a mission in the world. Some help neighborhoods in their areas to develop economic strength and others address more wide-reaching regional needs. Except for land-grant universities, which have a specific mission to help their states develop strengths, many institutions traditionally advance these external missions more as corporate bodies than as academic institutions.

The new claims we see are enabling scholars to serve the region, the nation, or the globe as academics—their more logical role. One visible example concerns the AIDS crisis and the

many ways scholars and institutions are trying to ease the problem medically, sociologically, and economically. Working with significant support from President Bush's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief, a $17-million federal grant in February 2004 with another $90 million to follow over five years, researchers from Harvard, Columbia, and other universities have accepted the task of easing the plight of AIDS in several countries in Africa. Although Nigerian physicians have criticized Harvard for delaying a program to treat AIDS patients, we are impressed that top scholars and research institutions would devote time and attention to work that seems to be a form of service rather than preserving their time for discovery or teaching. Universities that resemble the global city, however, are more likely to expand definitions of academic claims.

An international community of graduate business students, professionals, and faculty known as Net Impact is another example of the crucial exchange between the university and the world. Seeking ways to use the power of business to create a better world, Net Impact covers issues like corporate social responsibility, environmentally sustainable business, and social enterprise—topics that are often forgotten in conventional coursework, but are essential in modern business practice. Now some Net Impact chapters are helping the United Nations advance the International Year of Microcredit. Their goal is to help micro-entrepreneurs especially in developing countries use small loans ($100 in some cases) to develop thriving business that contribute to stronger local economies.

As both examples demonstrate, scholars and their work in the world are at the heart of this exchange. Now some institutions are foregrounding the unique assets their scholars can offer. For example, some are systematically reducing the lag between the development of findings and public awareness of that knowledge by providing editing support for junior faculty who need publications in time for tenure decisions, press briefings that translate research reports into more readily usable forms, and investments in research pipelines that address immediate needs of specific populations without interruption. These practices demonstrate that it is no longer useful, or even accurate, to say that the contemplative approach of academics is divorced from the tangible needs of the rest of society.

Introducing external audiences to academic work brings other, more internal, gains. Some programs attract major donors who are more interested in the problems their investment will address than in previous institutional ties. These entrepreneurial donors are more likely to invest in the right academic expertise or location than honor their own undergraduate connections. The ties donors form with individual scholars can also be key, encouraging leaders and scholars to approach donors as a team.

While the dynamics that define these three exchanges are positive, they can also have dampening effects. As we have said in previous sections, these programs question traditional

academic structures, and they may question administrative lines as well. Whereas provosts and deans have been charged to plan academic programs, now presidents are joining scholars across departments and schools to move on those fronts. Whereas presidents and their heads of external relations once raised funds, now scholars are joining those teams. These new behaviors argue for team approaches that do more than merely duplicate the work individuals have performed.

Taken together, these exchanges suggest that the very *absence* of long-trusted boundaries signals a transformation in an academy where creative leaders are helping scholars take down walls to solve contemporary problems and collaborate across boundaries to define new routes to knowledge production. When chaotic activity and not the appearance of order is the goal, leaders are free to advance ideas rather than build fences to contain them. Instead of attempting to mend the walls of bureaucracy, they are backing dynamic forces that allow new claims to benefit not only scholars and disciplines, but also universities themselves, and the vibrant global village they both resemble and serve.

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