

The Idea of a University in 21st Century America
Transcript of President Richard L. McCormick's Interview on *The Open Mind*
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RICHARD HEFFNER, HOST OF *THE OPEN MIND*: I'm Richard Heffner, your host on *The Open Mind*.

And many times over the past half-century the theme of our conversations at this table has been the nature, the purpose...even indeed, quite often even the failures as well as the achievements of higher education in America.

Mostly, we've talked about what in the 19th century John Henry Cardinal Newman described as...famously as "The Idea of a University". Not a strange subject for me, of course, for during all of my professional life I've been a university teacher. And my *Open Mind* guests for these conversations have all been leaders of major American *private* colleges and universities.

Among them, Frances Ferguson of Vassar; Nan Keohane of Wellesley and then Duke; James Conant and Derek Bok of Harvard; John Fischer, Larry Cremin and Arthur Levine of Teachers College; John Bradamas, Jay Oliva and John Sexton of NYU; William McGill and Michael Sovern of Columbia, my own alma mater.

All the while, to be sure, America's great *public* universities have grown enormously, not only in sheer numbers of students who pass through their now equally ivied portals, but in terms, too, of the role they play in determining who we are as a people and what we become as a nation.

Well, my guest today has led two of these *public* universities: American historian Richard L. McCormick was president of the University of Washington from 1995 to 2002. Then he became president of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Now, of course, I ought first to offer something of a possible conflict-of-interest disclaimer: Dr. McCormick is my boss at Rutgers...and his father, Rutgers late great teacher, state and university historian Dick McCormick was my senior colleague when I first went to teach there in 1948. Much that has changed on the banks of the Raritan ever since surely reflects change in the respective roles of our public and private universities, and today I want first to ask Dr. McCormick how he sees these roles developing in the future. Must there now be *two* "ideas of a university" in America? What do you think?

RICHARD L. McCORMICK, PRESIDENT, RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY: Well, Mr. Heffner...first of all what I think is I'm very appreciative to you for inviting me to be on this program and for raising a provocative opening question about, about higher education.

Judging from the list of presidents who have appeared on your *Open Mind* show I'm in very, very good and proud company. And I, I thank you for including me there.

With regard to public and private universities...no I don't think we need two different concepts of the university, or two different models. They, they have, after all, some very great objectives in common. Both our public universities and our private universities serve to educate the men and women for the 21st century.

In this, in this instance, serve to create new ideas through research and artistic, artistic creativity and they serve the larger communities of which they are a part.

They also, public and private institutions, I should say, are increasingly similar in the revenues upon which they depend. All the public universities of which I'm aware are currently engaged in, or soon will be engaged in, major fundraising campaigns such as the privates have done for decades

They, they depend...both of them...on federal research support, on tuition from their students, and on other common revenue streams.

Decreasingly, the public universities are not able to depend upon their state governments fully to sustain them or to enable them to achieve their ambitions.

So those two basic ways, some shared goals for the future and some increasing similarities in how they are supported...our public and private universities are, are not so different. However...

HEFFNER: Yeah.

McCORMICK: Public, the public institutions have a, have a special obligation. Sometimes borne by the privates, but always, always the responsibility of public institutions...to serve the communities of which they are a part; to be attentive to the young men and women and increasingly older men and women in those, in those communities, to make sure that their research is aligned with the needs of their states and, and the nation.

Many private universities do these things very well, too. But it's an obligation they, they choose. For us in public institutions, it's intrinsic; it's who we are...we serve the people of our states and the nation and the world.

HEFFNER: I wonder...you talk about both of them being presented with the problem of raising dollars.

McCORMICK: Yes.

HEFFNER: How does it differ? Why is it that state legislatures are no longer being as generous...let's not measure how generous they were, but are not being as generous as they were in the past...to this most important of all facet of their societies.

McCORMICK: Well, certainly your generalization is correct. In, in recent decades the percentage of the cost of a student's education that has been borne by the public...the taxpayers, the state legislature...however you want to define it, has, has declined.

Now in many institutions it's considerably less than half. Certainly it is at my own...at Rutgers University. Correspondingly, the reliance on the students and their parents for the payment of tuition and fees has increased. And correspondingly as well, our reliance on private fundraising has grown, has grown, too.

It's commonplace for Princeton and Harvard and Duke and Stanford to be raising money privately, but in recent decades it has been incumbent upon public institutions to do that as well.

And many of them are, in fact, embarked on multi-billion dollar campaigns that are essential to the achievement of their ambitions and the fulfillment of their goals.

HEFFNER: Where is that old ideal of truly a public supported university?

McCORMICK: Well, I, I think it's...I think it's in; I think it's in transition. Certainly the history of the American people's support for public institutions is very, is very robust. Beginning...just to take a historical point of reference...with the 1882 Moral Land Grant Act...

HEFFNER: Mmm-hmm.

McCORMICK: ...signed by President Lincoln, the federal government invested by allocating lands to the Land Grant Institutions...one of which was Rutgers...in the expectation that it would provide education and learning and research in the agricultural and manufacturing and mining sciences. Military science may have been included in the Act as well.

Therein lies the origins of the, of the practical side of contemporary higher education, particularly our schools of agriculture and of engineering. And the, the broad expectation that institutions like ours will serve the societies of which, of which...of which the institutions are a part.

Another climatic era of change followed World War II. The GI Bill...actually passed during the War in 1944 established the principle that the Federal government would invest heavily in, in student aid. In the support, in this case, for returning GIs, but the principle was broadened to women and men, and men and women of color and that...so that access to higher education in our nation grew dramatically.

At the same time, the federal government began investing significantly in scientific and technological research with amazingly positive impacts upon our nation's economy and really the world's economy.

At the same time the states were investing mightily in traditional four year institutions like mine and inventing a whole new category of colleges called "community" and "county" colleges in the 1960s and 1970s. These were...well, these were the investments of my parents' generation.

You were kind enough to reference my, my father. These were the investments of my parents' generation of Americans...in public and to some extent in private higher

education. Confident that broadening access and opportunity and, and growing research and learning would, would benefit our people and our economy and enable us to solve pressing human problems.

I, I know that...I know that university's like Rutgers and many private institutions as well, still share those ambitions, but are, but are struggling to obtain the support they require to do so.

HEFFNER: Why? Why is it so difficult now for state legislatures to understand the enormous need...and when we talk about "education presidents" and "education governors"...what's happened to the "education legislatures"?

McCORMICK: Well, ahh...first of all, they are...they are enormously oppressed by a myriad of needs in healthcare, in transportation, in support for K-12 education, in support for municipal governments...the, the demand upon limited state appropriated resources is, is very, very great.

Next, I think our colleges and universities are regarded these days as mature institutions, capable of identifying, for themselves, other revenue streams. And, indeed, as I've already indicated in that...in this conversation, we are, we are well embarked on that.

But for the public research universities, of which Rutgers is one...there's a core, substratum, essentiality to, to public funding without we can't fulfill the obligation we have to the next generation of young men and women and without which we can't carry on our research and service to society.

HEFFNER: What's the impact upon the way we teach our young of this economic need, of this financial need?

McCORMICK: Well, at Rutgers and at universities across the country, we're thinking very, very deeply about that question, particularly about how we provide education for our undergraduates. You know, sometimes in a big research university, public or private, undergraduate education can fall by the wayside.

When research and professional education and graduate education are, are central to the missions, and where faculty are rewarded in many cases for fulfilling their...achieving their goals in those realms, the undergraduates can sometimes have difficulty finding all that they need.

For example, just because a faculty member at an institution like mine may be on the verge of winning election to the National Academy of Sciences for the brilliance of her research, doesn't necessarily mean that an undergraduate knows that she or he can work side beside that scientist in the laboratory. Just because a department...such as the Department of Philosophy at Rutgers is the top ranked one in the world, doesn't mean that undergraduates can always find the courses they want or, or have access to the top faculty.

So, we're working very hard at Rutgers. And I know it's true at public and private institutions across the country to ensure that our undergraduates have the full benefit of the excellence of our...of our faculty and of our, of our programs.

That means instituting first year seminars so that students first arriving at a big institution can immediately have an opportunity of getting contact with a senior member of the faculty.

It means encouraging undergraduate research so that as they progress through their four or five years as an undergraduate, they have an opportunity to work along side a faculty in creating knowledge for themselves; something they're going to have to do for the rest of their 21st century lives.

HEFFNER: It's...ahh...it's impressive what...because it's our university...what, what Rutgers has done in this regard and I know that as busy as you are as president of the university, you teach the freshman honors seminar and the best...the greatest fun I've had...I've learned the most in giving the freshman honors seminar for the past few years. I wonder, though, whether all in all you have to look at 21st-century America and say, "The numbers have just outreached...or gone beyond...surpassed our capacity to deal...not with you on one end of the log and a student on the other, but to deal with our individual students."

McCORMICK: Well, I hope not. But certainly your point about the numbers is well taken. The sons and daughters of the overly large baby boom generation of which I'm a member are now in college or very close to being in college.

They're...this is not a hypothetical cohort, they're real, they're in seventh grade, eighth grade, or they're sophomores in college. And, and they're the largest college going cohort that we've ever had. I think their numbers, in terms of high school graduates, will peak in 2009, which is two years from now. But it won't go down much after that. The numbers will remain as great as they are; as they will be then 'til about 2017 or 2020.

So, there's a real...there's a real issue of capacity and of, and of access. And we simply must address it. We also need to make sure that the tuition doesn't go too high and/or that need based financial aid keeps up with it. Or we'll return to a pre-World War II system of inequity and, and denied access in which, on the whole, those who went to college were relatively well-to-do white men and others, for the most part, were excluded.

I'm not predicting we're going to get back to that anytime in the near future, but we certainly must guard against it by ensuring that our colleges and universities have places for all of those who want to attend and who can benefit from attendance at college, and that's the great majority of young Americans. And we need to do that by making sure that they can afford to, either by keeping tuition down or by the increasing provision of need-based financial aid.

HEFFNER: The...you say "those who can benefit..." and then you say, that's most of them.

McCORMICK: Right.

HEFFNER: Is that true?

McCORMICK: Yeah, I think it is. The, the...the great majority of, of young and for that matter, older Americans in our, in our land today need, need some kind...the benefit of higher education.

Think about this...the 21st century world in...to which we are embarking is by far the most complicated era in, in human history. The complexity of the, of the problems...the international, global nature of the challenges we're facing...whether we're talking, as we are in America today about immigration...or about our global economy or about the environment and global warming...are tremendously complex human issues.

And for the next generation and the next they're going to have to be the best educated people of all time. They're going to have to know about a great many things. They're going to have to know how to formulate and solve problems. They're going to have to know how to accumulate the information required to solve those complicated problems and express that information. They're going to need to know how to work in teams because no individual can solve any, any problem of importance.

These are, these are educational challenges, but they are, they are reflections of larger global and international and environmental challenges. If, if ever...if ever young and older men and women in America and around the world needed the benefit of a, of a college education, it is now.

HEFFNER: Let me be parochial. Not just about Rutgers, but about our field...American history. My students have certainly been hearing me for years now talking about "dumbing down" and I wonder what your own "fix" is on that? I have the sense that our students know so very little about our past. And then I think to myself..."well, probably this has been said forever by the elders of society". What do you think?

McCORMICK: Well, like, like you I share a commitment to history, it is my...it is my discipline and as my remarks in this show have already indicated I tend to take a historical perspective on whatever subject is at, is at hand. So I believe deeply in the importance of history. And I have to agree with you that, that today's students know less than those of an earlier, of an earlier day. But, but you know this is...this, too, is a reflection of a larger, of a larger problem.

Many of those who arrive, even at an outstanding competitive institution like my own are not fully prepared for college level work and that's simply because they lack a basic knowledge of American history, they may lack the, the fundamental abilities in reading and writing and math that they will require and so we need to, we need to provide them some of that even after they have arrived at, at the university.

Not, not for the majority of our first year students, but for, but for some. I, I...though...particularly those who have come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have gone to school in our, in our cities come, come to college mentally perfectly capable of getting a

college education, but not as well equipped in the fundamentals as they, as they, as they should be.

This is, this is a problem to which...this is a challenge which the universities can help contribute solutions, but it's really a larger, a much larger social challenge as well.

HEFFNER: Is there any difference between the state of education in our country east and west, north and south?

McCORMICK: Well, I don't...I don't know that there are fundamental regional differences. But there are certainly, certainly differences based on who your parents are and on what kind of a community you live in.

If you're, if you're fortunate to live in suburban America and to have parents who got some education themselves and who have a, have a good income between the two of them, or however, however your family may be supported, you're, you're in...you're far better advantaged, you're far more likely to go to college, you're far more easily able to take advantage of what a college or university has to offer than if you grew up poor in an urban environment without, without parents making a good income or having had college or university experience themselves.

So while there are not, to my knowledge, fundamental regional differences in America, it still makes a big difference the kind of community you grew up in and who your Mom and Dad are.

HEFFNER: Well, given the years you've spent as president of the University of Washington, I was wondering whether on the university level, we in the East were better off, worse off...

McCORMICK: Well, ahh...

HEFFNER: ...different?

McCORMICK: ...yeah, there is a, there is a regional distinction that I, I would posit is pretty clear and important it gets back to the very beginning of the conversation, as you started and it concerns public education and private education.

Here in the northeastern United States we are blessed with many, many, many private colleges and universities. Some of them, like Rutgers...some of...Rutgers was previously private, dating back to the Colonial times...the institutions that were established in 18th century America, with the exception of Rutgers and William and Mary are currently still private. And we have hundreds, perhaps even thousands of others as well in this, in this part of the United States.

That means that public higher education in the Northeast, in New York, New Jersey and the New England states is, is more of an acquired taste and there's a more recent commitment to it than in the West.

You mentioned the University of Washington, whose president I had the privilege to be for seven years. The University of Washington was established in 1861, 37 years before there was a State of Washington. The people of that territory had already expressed their commitment to higher education.

Now there weren't yet many man and women in the territory even qualified to go to a university, but there it was in 1861.

In New Jersey by contrast, Rutgers became The State University of New Jersey in 1956, 180 years after there was a New Jersey...that would be 1776, with the Revolution...there was a state university of New Jersey.

Meanwhile, of course, in this region of the country private colleges and universities had thrived. And Rutgers originally was, was one of them, of course. So there is a, there is a northeastern liability, I would say, with respect to public higher education ... a "newness" about it. 1956 is not all that recent, of course, it's 51 years ago, but compared to the traditions in the Midwest and in the far West and in the South, the Northeast has been somewhat short-changed with respect to public higher education.

I also had the privilege of serving for a few years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill argues with the University of George all the time...which of them has the distinction of being the oldest public institution in the, in the country. Of course, as someone formerly affiliated with UNC ...

HEFFNER: You know which...

McCORMICK: I know that they're right, of course. But...in the Northeast the tradition of public higher education and of support for public higher education is more recent and I would say that one of the consequences is that there's less instinctive and habitual support for public higher education. But I would also say...blaming ourselves that we perhaps are less...understand less well what it means to be the State University of New Jersey, or of New York or of Massachusetts than they understand in Michigan or North Carolina or Washington.

HEFFNER: What do you mean by that?

McCORMICK: Well, I mean...you know, the state, the state university exists not only to educate the men and women of that state and others as well, but to, but to help solve its problems. To align its research with the needs of the people, whether they're in environmental protection or healthcare delivery or urban revitalization or, or transportation or, or you name it. And, ah, in, in Michigan and in North Carolina, there is a understanding of that mission that I think exceeds that in the Northeast.

One early 20th-century president of the University of North Carolina, whose name escapes me now, famously said, not terribly eloquent, but perfectly on point, "the boundaries of the university are co-terminus with the boundaries of the state."

And, and that...there's an instinctive understanding of that in North Carolina and I think, I think there is in California, too, for example. A state that has over the decades invested

through its public research universities in economic development and in problem solving and in, in addressing challenges of the, of the future.

University of California just does that, you know...they wake up in the morning and do that. They know that's, they know that's their job and the people of the state know that's their job as well.

I aim, I aim to bring Rutgers to that point. Not, not only academically, but in terms of service to the people of the New Jersey and the nation and the world.

HEFFNER: Well I was very, very impressed with...let's see if I can find it in the moment...yeah, yeah...we have left. A speech you made, "But being a leading state university isn't easy and doing so will require us to bear a paradoxical burden. Are we part of the marketplace or are we aloof from it? We are both. Are we basically about ideas, or practice? We are both. Is our highest responsibility at Rutgers to discover or to serve? It is both. Should we focus on our state or should we be part of a worldwide conversation about ideas and ideals? We simply must do both". And that's very well put.

McCORMICK: Well, thank you for, for quoting that. That is from my Inaugural Address in 2003. And it expresses, it expresses an ideal that I, I hold to very passionately, that a university is a, is a special place. It is in some respects even an ivory tower. It...it is devoted to the creation of ideas and the transmission of learning for its own sake. But those ideas also are essential to the improvement of humankind and to the addressing of the global challenges I mentioned before.

HEFFNER: Well, we have a minute and a half left...let me ask you... are those damn people...the faculty...like me, letting you attain your ideals?

McCORMICK: You know, I, I grew up as a faculty brat at Rutgers.

HEFFNER: Right.

McCORMICK: And I served on the Rutgers faculty proudly for 16 years. So I'm, I'm one of "them ...at least I fancy that I am. The faculty of our university are extremely supportive of the goals and ideas that I've expressed today. They might put them a little bit differently than their President does, but they are...they're excellent. They teach well, they research well. And they genuinely wish to be faculty of The State University of New Jersey.

I'm, I'm one of them, I'm teaching a first year seminar next year, as you, as you noted.

HEFFNER: You are a very upbeat president. It's a damn good thing that you are. Thank you for joining me today, Dr. McCormick, on *The Open Mind*.

McCORMICK: Thank you very much.

HEFFNER: And thanks to you in the audience. I hope you'll join us again next time.

And if you would like a transcript of today's program, please send four dollars in check or money order to: *The Open Mind*, P. O. Box 7977, F.D.R. Station, New York, New York 10150. Meanwhile, as an old friend used to say, "Good night and good luck."