Fostering Collaboration in Higher Education

John Sexton, President, New York University

Lee C. Bollinger, President, Columbia University

Academy President Patricia Meyer Spacks presided over the 1852nd Stated Meeting, held in New York City on November 28, 2001. The communication was presented by the then-incoming presidents of New York University and Columbia University, John Sexton and Lee C. Bollinger. Both speakers commented on important issues confronting our nation's institutions of higher learning today. They also discussed the importance to New York City of increased collaboration between their own universities in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, emphasizing the benefits of interinstitutional cooperation for all colleges and universities, as well as for society in general.

John Sexton

I'm going to try to describe the context in which our universities exist—the context that comes from being located in New York City, especially in light of the events of September 11. Lee Bollinger will then discuss some more specific issues, embellishing on what I say and no doubt improving it.

I think everyone in the room knows that there's never been a time in the history of humankind when universities were more important. I think it's also fair to say that there's never been a time when they existed on the verge of such change as they will encounter over the coming decades.

The good news, in my view, is that our universities today are extraordinary. As the headlines attest, they are the envy of the world. People come to us from around the world to learn and to participate in

Left to right: John Sexton (president, New York University), Academy President Patricia Meyer Spacks (University of Virginia), and Lee C. Bollinger (president, Columbia University).

research. We produce wonderfully trained graduates. We cultivate expert knowledge, and we create ideas. We do all of this without peer, making education one of America's great export commodities.

But there are some problems with the American educational establishment at the university level—particularly, I would say, at the elite university level. I think there is an ethos of contentment, a tendency to rest on our laurels. I think we are remarkably risk-averse in the changing environment in which we exist. We have encouraged, nurtured, even indulged the notion of the faculty member as an independent contractor—a person who does what he or she wants, when he or she wants, with relatively little formal obligation. We have encouraged a view of our schools as independent contractors, sometimes treating the enterprise of education as if it were some kind of relational sport. We have failed to reflect sufficiently on how we deploy the human, financial, and intellectual resources at our disposal.

Our failure goes back to the invention of the man about whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation—Charles Elliot, who served for 40 years as president of Harvard University. Elliot, who spoke as a Unitarian thinker on behalf of others of his faith, sought to create a dogmaless religion. Along the way, he also had an impact on education. Elliot created the modern

Harvard, and as part of that, he created the elective system. Today, I fear, the elective system has been reduced to a kind of educational relativism—almost a course-choice equivalent of "Well, that's your opinion" as the end of a conversation, as if all ideas were the same, and therefore all courses were the same. To put it simply and institutionally, instead of viewing it through the lens of the individual student, I think we've lost sight of what the Jesuits taught me to call the search for the *ratio studiorum.* Why is it that we're doing what we're doing with the institutions we serve? Our failure to ask this question raises a problem. We have a clear product: the associational good of assembling the smart people who come together at our institutions. But we have not thought deeply about how to use what we have assembled.

In that general context of both good news and warning, how does a rookie president view the possibility for a university in New York? I think any conversation on this topic has to have a kind of "pre-" and "post-" quality to it—the demarcation, of course, being September 11. Before September 11, looking through the lens of New York City, there were some opportunities on the table, generally available in the context I just described, to create a faculty model that moves away from the view of faculty as independent contractors and toward the view of faculty as engaged and present—a model in which faculty members see conversations with colleagues over work as part of the coin of the realm, and conversations with students in the classroom as the beginning of a conversation that continues throughout the week.

Everywhere, not just in New York, we see a breaking of the time-space continuum through technology and chat rooms and all kinds of devices that are right before us. But in New York, it seems to me, there are some special opportunities. First of all, there are two New York themes that are quite striking:

• I draw this from something I heard from the folks who are trying to get the Olympics held in New York: of the 200 countries represented at the Sydney

summer Olympics, 189 are represented in the New York City public school system by children born in those countries. Think about that for a moment. No other city in the world could make that claim. New York is the world's first universal city. It is the world's first global city. That has implications for our university, from student rights to faculty research. What's local in New York is global. If we can learn to speak across the divides among those 189 countries going right into the public school system and walking the streets of our city, we will be creating a prototype for the world.

• There's a big advantage in knowing New York. West Coast lawyers taught me this. They said to me, "We have a California kid who wants to practice law in California; we want that kid to go law school in New York." Why? Because then he'd know how to understand New York. I think that's true not just for law but also for business and the arts. If you want to "make it anywhere," as the song says, you've got to understand New York. You don't have to make it in New York, but you've got to understand New York, because you're going to wind up relating to it.

These two themes that are unique to New York give us the opportunity—and I'm using *us* advisedly here, for both myself and Lee—to create a venue for a world conversation that can't exist anyplace else, that wouldn't feel as natural and comfortable anyplace else.

John Rosenwald (Bear Stearns Companies, Inc.) and Academy Vice President Louis Cabot.

How has September 11 changed that? Well, for those who lived through it at or near Ground Zero, as we at NYU did, there was a lot of practical disruption. We had 3,500 students who were displaced from their dormitory residences, all of which were within a few blocks of, or in some cases right across the street from, Ground Zero. Those 3,500 students were homeless, living with other students in our Greenwich Village dorms, or with faculty, or outside the city.

I teach a class to the freshmen at NYU, and I can tell you that they're still disoriented. My law students are still disoriented too. As a general matter, the younger the student, the more disoriented. We're still trying to get over September 11, but the events of that day have not disrupted anyone's commitment to New York. It's interesting to me that as I walked around the law school in the week after September 11, I did not discover—and I have yet to discover—a single law student who is changing preexisting plans to work or study in New York City and going to California instead. Indeed, I know of 14 students who have changed preexisting plans to leave New York; they have decided instead to stay. That's quite extraordinary. I think most of us got the data on early-action applications this week, and law school applications at NYU are up 40 percent. Our university applications are down about 5 percent, but in terms of quality, they're better. At most colleges around town, application figures are either the same or up a bit. I haven't seen any effect on faculty recruitment.

But I think something more important has come out of September 11. What was an opportunity for us before September 11—to create a special educational enterprise here in New York through collaborative effort among our great universities—is now, to me, a moral imperative. And it's an important part of the answer to the attack on civilization that occurred on September 11.

There has always been a lot of cooperation among the great universities in this town, but now we've got to have more of it. Lee and I were talking about

Vartan Gregorian (Carnegie Corporation of New York) and President Patricia Meyer Spacks.

this earlier. Both of our universities benefit from the fact that this city is described by the *New York Times* as the philosophical capital of the world. I want you to know that I'm great at faculty recruiting. I love doing it, and I think it's important. But as much as I love Harvard, which gave me my chance in life, I respect Yale and Stanford. If I'm recruiting a faculty member, and that faculty member is in a five-set choice, including those three schools and Columbia and NYU, and that faculty member's not coming to NYU, I want her to go to Columbia. Why? Because education is not a zero-sum game. The conversations of my philosophers, including Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Nagel and Jürgen Habermas, are advanced by having Jeremy Waldron of Columbia in those conversations. Just last week, we did a colloquium on Jeremy's most recent book.

I think that Lee and I—two friends who go back a long time, with common roots—will attempt to write an agenda of cooperation around some of these themes. Paging through some stuff, I found out that in 1892, at the 19th Century Club, Henry McCracken, then chancellor of NYU, gave his talk on the metropolitan university, in which he proposed a federation between Columbia and NYU. We're not going to go that far. But we're going to do a lot, and we're going to build something special.

Lee C. Bollinger

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak at this Stated Meeting and to do so with my friend John Sexton. I have just a few remarks about the state of our universities today. Given the brevity of this occasion, I hope you will forgive me the oversimplification of many complex issues.

Though it may be hard for many of us to admit, the last ten years have been glorious years for higher education in the United States. Those of us who regularly ask for money from the federal government or state legislatures or private donors may emphasize our neediness, but our sense of urgency for more funding stems more from a sense of the tremendous opportunities before us for improvements in teaching and research rather than from any dip below the historical levels of available resources. The truth is that universities are thriving centers of learning and new ideas, well funded and widely respected in our society.

This glorious era stems in part from the vitality of new areas of understanding that have been opened in recent years. I am thinking about the biological sciences in particular, but there are several other notable fields that have recently brought significant advances too. The extraordinary discoveries in the life sciences are so profound, in fact, that it is possible to imagine every field and area of inquiry—including the arts—being deeply affected. In a sense, I think of this as a second chance (the other being the major advances in physics in the first half of the twentieth century) at bridging the divide between the sciences and the humanities that has made them two separate cultures.

Many of the troublesome issues that bedeviled universities in the 1980s have been addressed or have subsided naturally. The earlier trend toward less and less attention to undergraduate education has been reversed, with great benefits not only to undergraduates but also to the general health of our institutions. Like parents, universities cannot be psychologically healthy if they do not care for

John Noble Wilford, former senior science editor, *New York Times,* and Albert Murray, cultural critic and novelist.

and nurture their youngest. The culture wars have subsided, and our institutions have addressed the broad public concern of the late 1980s with the cost of higher education. Annual tuition increases have been moderated, while other sources of revenues for our institutions have helped to make up the gaps in funding critical to meeting expectations for teaching and research. Universities have been more effective in making the case that the actual cost of providing the education we offer is at least twice as much as what even the most expensive private institutions charge for tuition. It has, moreover, become clearer that a university education is a worthwhile investment in a child's future.

While the past decade has been a very bright moment in the history of higher education in this country, and while the future continues to look bright, there are several areas of concern that require our attention now. I worry, for example, that the stagnation and even decline in the general economy will begin to put pressure on us to elevate tuition increases, and that will undermine the trust we have built with the public. I am especially concerned for public universities. The reason is that in almost all cases, public universities do not have endowments big enough to carry them through difficult economic times. The extraordinary increases in private university endowments over the last

decade have created a differential system of wealth that may well have profound consequences for our dual system of public and private higher education.

This dual system, in my view, has had great benefits for our country. Each side has brought different things to the table of higher education: public universities have brought access, diversity, and a sense of public trust, while private universities have brought academic excellence and the cornerstone of academic autonomy and freedom. Each side has influenced the other, to good ends all around. These reciprocal beneficial effects, however, will be diminished if the differential in available resources increases greatly.

I am also gravely concerned about the attacks in recent years on the principle of racial and ethnic diversity in higher education. This is a matter of the highest consequence for our responsibility to educate our students for the modern world. Ever since the landmark decision of the Supreme Court in *Brown* v. *Board of Education,* our society has been committed to overcoming the harsh consequences of racial divisions and to achieving integration. Higher education, by making positive efforts in the admissions process to include minority students—just as universities have done for years in seeking geographic and socioeconomic diversity—has done its part to fulfill the aspirations of *Brown.* Although the Supreme Court in the late 1970s upheld that practice as constitutional, we now face a major effort by certain groups to overturn that decision and the substantial efforts of higher education. This is a matter that strikes at the heart of our ability to fashion a good education. For nothing is more essential to education than crossing sensibilities, and in our modern world, nothing is better able to contribute to that capacity than living and learning in an integrated educational community. Within the next year or so, the Supreme Court will have to face this issue, and the decision it reaches—to stay with the course of constitutional law over the last 50 years or to change course—will have the highest consequences for our colleges and universities and for the nation.

Aileen Ward and Jerome Bruner (both, New York University) with Harriet Zuckerman (Mellon Foundation).

There is, then, much to be grateful for in the state of our system of higher education and much to be concerned about. One positive consequence of these trends, both good and bad, is that we seem to be seeing more and more benefits of cooperation among our universities. The scale required to pursue new areas of knowledge draws us into collaborations, as does the necessity of becoming more efficient in certain ways and of making our case to the public on the various challenges we face collectively. I am delighted to have NYU as a potential partner for Columbia University in this new world. New York City is, in countless ways, a kind of capital of the world, and these two distinguished universities can do much together to benefit from and contribute to that capital. In doing so, we will benefit the broader society as well.

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