C onsistent with the egalitarianism that has always been the hallmark of American society and the frontier spirit that still flourishes in the American West, Arizona State University has undertaken the task of designing an institution that combines the highest levels of academic excellence, inclusiveness to a broad demographic, and maximum societal impact. Predicated thus on excellence, access, and impact, the paradigm is conceptually framed as the “New American University,” and I believe that it has relevance for colleges and universities, both public and private, worldwide.

There are many ways to parse the concept of the New American University, but, in brief, its objectives are inherent in eight “design aspirations” that, reduced to their essential terms, enjoin the academic community to (1) embrace the cultural, socioeconomic, and physical setting of the institution; (2) become a force for societal transformation; (3) pursue a culture of academic enterprise and knowledge entrepreneurship; (4) conduct use-inspired research; (5) focus on the individual in a milieu of intellectual and cultural diversity; (6) transcend disciplinary limitations in pursuit of intellectual fusion; (7) socially embed the university, thereby advancing social enterprise development through direct engagement; and (8) advance global engagement. The restructuring of Arizona State University is taking place in the context of the design aspirations of the New American University.

DILEMMA: EXCELLENCE OR ACCESS?

Research universities both in the United States and around the world are the primary source of the knowledge and innovation that has improved the quality of life and driven the global economy worldwide, but in America and elsewhere, leading institutions tend to be exclusive—that is to say, they define their excellence based on exclusion. It is generally taken for granted that there are two types of universities: those that focus on academic excellence and discovery, and those that focus on access. Institutions that focus on academic excellence admit only the finest students and all others are expected to attend less competitive schools. The assumption is that the individuals who attend these barebones institutions may or may not accomplish something, but at the end of the day it makes little difference. In terms of societal outcomes, this implicit calculation is not only shortsighted but a fatal error.

We believe that many public universities in the United States, particularly research grade universities, have abandoned certain core elements of their public mission, and have in a sense morphed into hybrid institutions, or semi-privatized universities, that operate on a narrow band of engagement. We reject this notion that excellence and
access cannot be achieved in a single institution, and thus propose the paradigm of the New American University. Our attempt to advance ASU on both agendas represents an effort to transcend this ubiquitous bifurcation and demonstrate that it is false. Our mission, as we have conceived it, is to build a comprehensive metropolitan research university that is an unparalleled combination of academic excellence and commitment to its social, economic, cultural, and environmental setting. Excellence, access, and impact are thus integral to our mission and integrated in a single institution.

IMPLEMENTING ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE: ORGANIZATIONAL RECONCEPTUALIZATION ACCORDING TO THE MODEL OF SCHOOL-CENTRISM

Arizona State University is mid-point in a decade of unprecedented change and decisive maturation, positioning itself to emerge as a prominent national university and comprehensive knowledge enterprise committed to teaching, discovery, creativity, and innovation. To promote access to excellence despite the challenges of burgeoning enrollment we have adopted a distributed model, operating from four differentiated campuses of equally high aspiration, with each campus representing a planned clustering of related but academically distinct colleges and schools. We term this empowerment of colleges and schools “school-centrism.”

The school-centric model produces a federation of unique colleges, schools, academic departments, and interdisciplinary institutes and centers (“schools”), and a deliberate and planned clustering of programs on each campus around a related theme and mission. Predicated on devolving intellectual and entrepreneurial responsibility to the level of the college or school, the model calls for each school to compete for status, not with other schools within the university, but with peer schools around the country and around the world. Schools are encouraged to grow and prosper to the extent of their individual intellectual and market limits.

The reconceptualized university is thus a federation of twenty-three unique interdisciplinary colleges and schools that together with departments and research institutes and centers comprise close-knit but diverse academic communities that are international in scope. Consistent with this school-centric model we have conceptualized and launched fourteen new interdisciplinary schools, including the School of Global Studies, the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, the School of Materials, and the School of Earth and Space Exploration.

Although we are first and foremost committed to educating the students of Arizona, we are equally a discovery organization, focused on contributing to regional economic development through enhanced research and academic programs, including major interdisciplinary research initiatives such as the Biodesign Institute, focused on innovation in healthcare, energy and the environment, and national security; the Global Institute of Sustainability (GIOS), incorporating the world’s first School of Sustainability; and the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict.

Consistent with our objective of differentiation and a focus on the needs of each individual student, we have set one of our campuses, for example, on a course to emerge as one of the nation’s leading polytechnics, with programs that provide both a theoretical and practical learning experience, preparing graduates for direct entry into the workforce. We are advancing two differentiated schools of engineering, one focused on research and the theoretical aspects of technology, and the other on practical application. Similarly, we have three schools of education and three schools of management or business, each of which is built on a different learning platform. Some are built on research platforms, some on leadership curriculum, and some on practical, learning-by-doing platforms. We are overlapping and merging these programs to achieve maximum leverage.

With two-dozen colleges and schools distributed across four campus platforms in a large metropolitan region, ASU considers the University of London, with its nearly three-dozen autonomous colleges and schools and institutes, an apt organizational prototype or model. At our four campuses we have instituted a model with no campus-level governance—neither chancellors nor provosts, but only deans heading colleges and schools, similar to the historical University of London. Although that federal system in London has been deteriorating over the past few decades, our system is intended to replicate the historical ideal.

At ASU we have also made efforts to eliminate what I term dangerous “hierarchical creep.” In the past there was the good campus, the not-so-good campus, and the still-lesser campus. Although not always explicit, that tiering process is very common in American universities, and perhaps in some European institutions, and it is a pernicious structural obstacle to student success. The historic Tempe campus used to be known as the “Main Campus,” but now we simply refer to it as Arizona State University at the Tempe campus. In order to avoid this tiering process we now
have only deans in the colleges and schools distributed throughout the city, engaged in creating individualized learning environments.

SOCIETAL IMPACT THROUGH ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE

There are approximately five thousand institutions of higher education in the United States, and of these roughly one hundred and fifty, both public and private, are classified as research grade in the Carnegie classification. ASU is at once the youngest and largest and fastest growing of these, enrolling more than sixty thousand undergraduate, graduate, and professional students on four campuses of equally high aspiration configured across metropolitan Phoenix. And we are the only one of these one hundred and fifty institutions with egalitarian admissions standards. Our admissions standards are determined by our assessment of a potential student’s ability to do university level work, not by test scores from an SAT or ACT or some other arbitrary indicator. What we mean by access is leaving no student outside of the institution who has the ability to do university level work.

Our approach at ASU has been to expand the capacity of the institution to meet enrollment demand, and provide expanded educational opportunities to the many gifted and creative students who do not conform to a standard academic profile, as well as offering access to students who demonstrate every potential to succeed but lack the means to pursue a quality four-year undergraduate education. We have therefore committed ourselves to building an institution that combines the highest levels of academic excellence with access to a broad demographic, and to accomplish this at scale. Such an institution seeks to provide the best possible education to the broadest possible spectrum of society, embracing the educational needs of the entire population—not only a select group, and not only the verbally or mathematically gifted. And its success will be measured not by who the university excludes, but rather by who the university includes, and from this inclusion will come the diversity necessary for the advancement of society.

NEGOTIATING DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES TO EXCELLENCE, ACCESS, AND IMPACT

Arizona State University is the only comprehensive public university in a metropolitan region with a population that already exceeds four million and is projected to merge into a megalopolis corridor with a population that could approach ten million in the coming decades. As one of the fastest-growing states in the nation, Arizona will continue to experience large increases in its college-age population but boasts an insufficient four-year college infrastructure to accommodate that growth. Arizona's economy is insufficiently diverse to accommodate its population expansion, and the state has major challenges associated with its environment, health care, social services, immigration, and the performance of P-12 education.

As is the case in California, where minorities already constitute a majority, within the near term no single demographic category will comprise a majority of the population in Arizona. The rapid population growth is accompanied by rapid cultural diversification, and the unprecedented transformation of the regional demographic profile requires ASU to offer access, promote diversity, and meet the special needs of underserved populations.

At the same time that the greater Phoenix metropolitan region matures and becomes a vast megalopolis, ASU has set a course to evolve from a regional university to a national research institution of top rank. In response to demographic pressures and because we believe that the university can best accommodate the needs of the region by facilitating the broadest possible distribution of its teaching, research, and community service, we plan to increase enrollment from the current level of 63,000 students to over 95,000 by 2020, thus providing expanded educational opportunities—both on-campus and online—to the many gifted and creative students who do not conform to a standard academic profile, as well as offering access to students who demonstrate every potential to succeed but lack the means to pursue a quality four-year undergraduate education.

ASU champions diversity, and the enrollment of students of color since 1996 has increased by 81 percent. And while the freshman class has increased in size by 36 percent during the past five years, enrollment of students of color has increased by 40 percent, with students from Hispanic backgrounds now comprising more than 14 percent of undergraduate enrollment. And in addition to our Latino students, ASU enrolls roughly 1,500 students from Native American backgrounds, one of the largest such enrollments in the nation. In Arizona our twenty-two Native American tribes speak different dialects that are often correlated with one another, but have no correlation with either English or Spanish.

As a public metropolitan research university, the profile of the student body, the character of the research enterprise, and the scope of community engagement differ from that of other institutions. ASU is a public asset that belongs
to all the citizens of Arizona, and is an active partner with the private sector in initiatives to enhance the social well-being, economic competitiveness, cultural depth, and quality of life of metropolitan Phoenix and statewide. With more than one thousand outreach opportunities in partnership with more than five hundred community organizations across Arizona, we invest in the future of the many diverse communities beyond our campuses.

ACCOMMODATING DEMAND FOR ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

To accommodate enrollment increases from 35,000 students in 1975 to 95,000 in 2020 is no small feat. In terms of resources and infrastructure, during the past five years we have added nearly seven million square feet of new space, including over one million square feet of new research space. The infrastructure required to accommodate such growth requires billions of dollars in capital investment, and in the past five years we have invested $1.5 billion in new facilities. There remain $3.5 billion of additional facilities yet to come, and the government will finance less than one-third of those. Investment has come from private sector partners, donors, and multiple municipal governments. We changed the funding model based on the return activities that municipalities in the region and state and nation can expect.

The irreducible core of a great university is the human relationships within its scope, but one cannot deny that the quality of the built environment is a factor in fostering both excellence and access. Undertaken in tandem with our organizational reconceptualization, our Comprehensive Development Plan is being implemented over the course of this decade. The master plan will redefine the relationships between the four ASU campuses, the clusters of colleges and schools that comprise each campus, the university community and its academic programs, and the university and surrounding metropolitan region. The intent of the master plan is to create campuses whose buildings and grounds reflect the scope and stature of a world-class institution and provide for our students a vibrant living and learning environment.

Among the most important planning principles we observe is the integration of the campus into the community, which we also term “embeddedness.” Most universities have traditionally built walls but we blasted ours down and made every effort to dismantle barriers. We are trying to make the university permeable and we do not consider this a trivial matter. And in terms of travel between campuses, we have installed wireless Internet access on buses and the municipal government is developing light rail service that connects the historic Tempe campus with our new downtown Phoenix campus.

Roughly ten thousand freshmen show up as first year students, with five thousand students coming to us from the community colleges in the region. Thus 15,000 first-time students come to the four campuses of our university, and we must make sure that they find their way between two dozen colleges and schools, and hundreds of programs within those colleges and schools, and that they find the program that has the highest probability of success for them. Because of our robust size and through the diversification of our programs and learning environments we believe we have a better chance of engaging a broad spectrum of the population from very diverse traditions and backgrounds.

Further access is accommodated through arrangements with the local community college district. The Maricopa Community College District has ten campuses and enrolls over two hundred fifty thousand students. ASU has established an alliance with the district that allows for a seamless transition between Maricopa Community Colleges and ASU. We are currently working on a program to allow simultaneous admission. We have over four hundred honor students participating in this arrangement between the community colleges and the university. And we bring in over four thousand transfer students per year through our articulation agreements. One third of the enrollment in the community college district is comprised of minority students, and this further allows us to foster diversity in our student body.

INVESTING IN STUDENT SUCCESS

The current level of investment in undergraduates through scholarship and gift support is approaching $100 million annually and for graduate students exceeds $50 million. We have greatly expanded both our investments in general financial aid, and in specific programs designed to help low-income Arizona students attend and graduate. The number of students enrolled from families below the poverty line has risen by roughly 500 percent, a number we expect will continue to grow, and we have increased the number of Pell Grant recipients by one-third, from 9,200 to 12,300 recipients.
Our demographic diversification is accompanied by differentiation in wealth. The average family income of the upper quintile of our students exceeds $200,000 per year. The bottom quintile has a tenfold lower level of income, less than $20,000 per year. Our institution thus enrolls students from families that are wealthy, even by American standards, and others from families that have virtually no income.

ASU Advantage provides tuition, fees, room, board, and books (via merit- and need-based grants and scholarships, and work-study) for students who meet all normal admissions standards and whose family income does not exceed $25,000. And all other students at all income levels pay only about 2 percent of the cost of tuition after merit-based scholarships and need-based grants. Although we expend university resources for programs like ASU Advantage and receive no support from the state, we are overcoming financial barriers to access.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of financial resources in building a great university, of course, because there is a direct correlation between financial strength and the ability to invest in student success. Another of our objectives has been to increase our freshman persistence rate, and we find that this, too, is chiefly a resource question. Not only does an enhanced resource base make it possible to build an academic environment that attracts top faculty and students alike, such funding allows for more academic advisors and supports services, sections of critical required courses, smaller and more optimal class sizes, and improved student-to-instructor ratios.

REJECTING THE GENERIC PUBLIC UNIVERSITY MODEL

Although at first glance the concerns of higher education in Arizona, in the heart of the American Southwest, would appear to be far removed from those in many other nations of the world, many of the societal, demographic, and economic challenges that we are negotiating anticipate coming trends worldwide, including those that confront Great Britain and the nations of Western Europe. And despite fundamental differences between national systems of higher education in our respective nations, underlying commonalities are apparent that it might prove fruitful to further explore. Because higher education construed as a collective transnational endeavor is pivotal as we seek to advance our national standards of living in the new global knowledge economy, I believe that we must rethink both our systems of higher education and our academic institutions, and work across national boundaries to advance new models and new designs that address the needs of the twenty-first century.

Differentiation is the process by which nature prospers, and in this manner universities realize more optimal adaptation to their respective environments. Arizona State University did not emerge in medieval Europe or in nineteenth century New England. As a New American University, we explicitly embrace our setting in twenty-first century Arizona and seek to address the needs of our region as well as global society. We reject standard-issue cookie-cutter practices in higher education that have gone unquestioned for decades and even centuries. Instead of merely “checking the box” to advance the standard solution, which is the certain path to mediocrity, we have sought to rethink the institution from the ground up. And by establishing new criteria for success, we are choosing not to participate in a race that has already been lost.

The design aspirations of the New American University represent a rethinking of the organizational principles on which universities have historically been based. I believe we have an opportunity to reinvent the American research university with the new model we are pioneering because Arizona State University is not yet a victim of its own success. Great institutions mature over the course of centuries, and although ASU traces its origins to a territorial teachers college in the nineteenth century, its trajectory as a comprehensive research university did not begin until 1958. Thus although formed by the organizational principles and practices of the past, ASU refuses to be determined by them.

A version of these remarks to appear in a publication of conference proceedings (forthcoming)