

# Values Added

## Undergraduate Education at the Universities of the CIC

Committee on Institutional Cooperation

University of Chicago  
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*The Committee on Institutional Cooperation is the academic consortium that links twelve major universities located in the Midwestern United States. For more than thirty years the Committee has enabled these universities to accomplish collectively far more than individual action would have permitted. Through cooperative programs, which range from low-cost student and faculty exchanges to multimillion-dollar research projects, the Committee acts as a catalyst for change, innovation, and resource enhancement and extension.*

*Along with its role in originating and guiding cooperative programs, the Committee serves as a forum for discussing issues that concern the chief academic officers of leading research institutions and other members of the higher education community. **Values Added** is an outgrowth of three years of discussion among Committee members concerning undergraduate education.*

### Prologue

As members of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, representing twelve leading American educational and research institutions, we have followed with great interest and concern the recent local and national discussions of the character, quality, and value of the undergraduate education offered by the colleges and universities of the United States. This subject is of enormous importance to the future of higher education, and to the future of our nation and its place in the world as well. In response to the current debate, we have undertaken to reexamine the beliefs, principles, and realities shaping the undergraduate experience on our campuses, and to identify our institutions' full potential so that we may better direct our efforts toward achieving it.

We believe an undergraduate education at a major research university offers important advantages and adds value that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Enunciation of those advantages should contribute materially to the understanding by faculty members, students, administrators, trustees, legislators, and the wider public of the mission of the research university and the prominent place of undergraduate education in that mission. We therefore offer the following brief description of the unique dimensions of undergraduate education at our universities and set forth the principles that guide our institutional practice. Our statement of these added values also may serve as a standard for the assessment of quality in our continuous efforts to improve.

Different students benefit from different educational settings. Small liberal arts colleges provide the most congenial learning environment for some, others blossom at community colleges, and many thrive at major research institutions. Each has a distinctive and valuable approach to teaching undergraduates. We do not intend to address those kinds of individual differences or to prescribe which kind of institutional setting is best for which students. We do, however, assert that the scope, scale, and diversity of the research university enable it to address and accommodate the educational needs of a very large number of undergraduate students. The human and physical resources that place it at the forefront of advancing knowledge make the research university uniquely capable of offering the kind of education that will prepare today's undergraduates for the rapidly changing knowledge-intensive world in which they will live. The opportunities our institutions afford enable our students to obtain an excellent undergraduate education within a context that makes their experience meaningful and useful both to them and to our society.

## **Undergraduate Students in the Research University**

The distinguishing characteristics of the research university is the research and scholarly activities of its faculty, staff, and students. From our research mission flow many advantages, benefits, and opportunities--values added to the student experience--that are often overlooked in evaluating undergraduate education.

**1**

Teaching and research support one another. Somehow many people have come to think that research and teaching are not compatible. This is a serious misconception. Research cultivates the critical skills needed to work from problem to solution, to sort out errors, and to pursue a single line of inquiry to a satisfactory end. It is research and its discoveries that make our universities and our libraries vital centers of inquiry. Without research there would be no expanding frontiers of knowledge, but simply the reiteration of the same "truths" to generation after generation of students. By requiring of our faculties that they both teach and engage in research and scholarly activity, research universities reinforce this connection. Research is stressed in the tenure and promotion process at our institutions, for our faculties must themselves be involved in advancing the state of knowledge in their fields in order to provide the advanced training and education required of an increasing proportion of our nation's population. But we also require clear evidence of teaching ability; and both are valued and rewarded. Indeed, the fact that some of our finest scholars and scientists are demonstrably outstanding teachers underscores the compatibility and mutual support of these primary faculty activities. It is important that our universities strive for excellence in undergraduate teaching as well as in research, and that a commitment to both priorities be reflected in our institutional policies and practices.

**2**

Personal interactions between undergraduate students and active scholars provide tangible benefits to both. Leaders in basic and applied research, who are engaged in defining and expanding the scope of human knowledge, provide an atmosphere that is diffused throughout the entire student body. Through role model and mentor relationships, these faculty members stimulate their students, motivating them to more intensive study. Contact with them also helps to produce a populace that is far better informed about the nature and benefits of research and scholarship. Even for the students whose only contact with a great scholar is in the classroom, the mere knowledge that their teacher is at the forefront of the field can be a powerful motivator. The communication from teacher to student of the excitement and satisfaction derived from research and scholarly activity may be found in other institutional settings, but it cannot be counterfeited.

3

Active scholars are in the best position to incorporate the most recent discoveries and developments in their field into undergraduate courses. Textbooks, by their very nature, are frequently limited to material that is dated and noncontroversial. The quality of instruction at our institutions is measured in large part by the professor's ability to go beyond textbook information to incorporate recent findings, new or different perspectives, and current debates. This contributes significantly to students' understanding of the nature of learning, enabling them not only to master facts and theories but also to learn how to think about them.

4

Undergraduate education at research institutions is further enriched by a constant flow of people and ideas from outside the university. The research activities of our faculties bring many researchers and other leaders from business, industry, government agencies, and other universities to our campuses. Drawn by the advanced research taking place and a desire to interact with the researchers conducting it, these visitors contribute to undergraduate education through their appearances in classes and in public forums, and also by bringing to the university current problems, approaches, insights, and solutions from other institutions and other sectors of society.

5

Research universities offer their undergraduates a vast range of options for specialized study. Like virtually all colleges and universities, research universities seek for their students a shared culture to which general education requirements, common learning experiences, and a core of mutual understandings all make important contributions. In addition, however, we believe that a university education should also offer specialization. Undergraduates, like faculty members, draw energy and resolve from specialized study and should be encouraged to seek focused, in-depth learning that will make their education different from that of their peers. The many and diverse specialized research interests of our faculties make available a wide range of areas of concentration and opportunities for students to participate directly in research projects. Working with eminent scholars who find these same problems compelling adds a real element of excitement and immediacy to the students' experience. Specialization and research participation help develop each student's unique capabilities while adding important depth to a well-rounded undergraduate education.

6

The teaching of a large and diverse research faculty provides valuable insights and perspectives for students. It is easy to overlook some of the ways in which the research specializations of the faculty contribute to the general education of undergraduates. In a sense, of course, all research is necessarily narrowly focused and specialized, but this specialization, this sharp focus on the particular, is what gives life and reality to the more universal points and principles that we seek to teach our undergraduates in basic as well as advanced courses. Furthermore, in a major research university, where there are many specialists working in closely related as well as divergent areas, research and professional relationships are not limited by traditional boundaries. In this context, opportunities and incentives for cross-fertilization of ideas, for research that traverses disciplinary lines, and for study that bridges cultures are plentiful for students as well as faculty members.

7

The quality of undergraduate education on our campuses is further enhanced by the contributions of our graduate students. A great deal has been said about problems relating to the use of teaching assistants. Some of this criticism may be well founded. At some research universities, for example, all too many freshmen may rarely see a professor except in a large lecture hall. But these concerns must be

balanced by the fact that our universities offer training programs in teaching and monitor the quality of the instruction given by graduate students. We have come to recognize that some of the very best one-on-one teaching in our classrooms and laboratories comes from these apprentice scholars and scientists, as the enthusiasm and excitement of their own study and research carry over into their teaching. Moreover, graduate students bridge the gap between students and faculty, functioning as mentors and role models who can serve student needs in ways the faculty cannot. Being closer in age to the undergraduates, graduate students are often able to provide them greater understanding, as well as support, encouragement, and motivation, leading them to a fuller understanding of the university and all it has to offer.

## 8

The undergraduate experience at a research university benefits from the resources maintained primarily to support faculty research and graduate education. These essential underpinnings of the research mission on our campuses include a wealth of libraries, laboratories, computers, and other equipment and facilities. Undergraduates benefit both directly and indirectly from this abundance. The facilities, equipment, and libraries that we maintain for the primary purposes of research and scholarship far exceed the needs of the average undergraduate student, but they help to raise the student's awareness of both the intricacies and the breadth of human knowledge, experience, and inquiry. To have firsthand experience with a laser beam generator, to perform in a completely equipped theater, or to hold and read a ~300-year-old book may not be indispensable to an undergraduate education, but they enrich it beyond measure.

### The Opportunities of Scale

Bigger is not necessarily better in education any more than in other domains of life. Educational institutions of all sizes have problems and opportunities that are related directly to their scale. For example, one of the challenges of attending a major university is that obtaining a good education requires considerable initiative and self-discipline on the part of the student. But one who seeks and takes advantage of the opportunities that such an institution offers can emerge not only with a better education, but as a stronger, intellectually more self-reliant person. We are committed to capitalizing fully upon the advantages that the superior size and scope of our universities give us in our efforts to provide our students with the very best education possible.

## 1

A major university provides its undergraduates the broadest range of curricular and extracurricular offerings. A university with extensive graduate and research programs offers its undergraduates a rich array of courses and curricula, including many small programs in specialized areas of study. An obvious example is the very large number of foreign languages taught on our campuses, where instruction may be offered in as many as forty different languages. Size and diversity also make possible the development of inter- and cross-disciplinary programs of study, in which undergraduates can find themselves on the leading edge of exciting new and developing fields of inquiry. Moreover, size makes possible greater flexibility in funding and allocation of other resources, which enables our institutions to adapt themselves more readily to the changing needs of undergraduate education. Major universities also are able to sustain commitment to programs of academic support for students across a broad range of academic talents and abilities, and to engage in experiments with different learning environments, new teaching methods, the early introduction of scientific and technological advances into the classroom, and the exploration of new areas of knowledge. In all of these ways, our institutions create opportunities for valuable experiences for undergraduates.

2

Large faculties bring a multiplicity of viewpoints to their subjects. Within a single English department, students are likely to find not one specialist in Victorian literature but several; not one but many specialists in the varieties of interpretive theory; not only traditional scholars, but those who bring radically different perspectives to bear on their work. And the same diversity of interests and viewpoints is to be found across the range of disciplines, from the humanities to the social and natural sciences. This diversity in our faculties helps to teach students what is perhaps the most important lesson of all: Truth is an elusive quality; and intelligent, informed, thoughtful people may interpret the same things in quite different ways, and can legitimately draw quite different conclusions from the same evidence.

3

At a major university the student body itself tends to have a greater diversity than is usual at smaller institutions. Most of the elementary and secondary schools from which our students are drawn do not provide them with daily exposure to a multiracial, multicultural environment. Students from a broad range of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds can be found at all of our institutions, even within student bodies made up largely of residents of one state. Students from many foreign countries, and particularly from developing nations, also populate our campuses in substantial numbers. Our large student populations thus include a great diversity of religions, races, family educational levels, occupations, life-styles, talents, interests, and abilities. Interactions within such large and diverse student bodies, gathered in one location with shared educational purposes, serve both the individual students and our society by fostering relationships conducive to mutual understanding and respect.

4

The many international relationships of major research institutions provide valuable experiences and opportunities for undergraduates. In a very real sense our student bodies, faculties, and curricula are internationalized. Undergraduates at our universities have many opportunities to interact with international students on our campuses and to study in foreign countries through a wide selection of study abroad programs. Our faculties include many who were educated or have done research abroad; and many more are involved in ongoing international research and education programs. Our universities have extensive ties to foreign institutions that lead to exchanges of faculty members and students as well as joint participation in research and education projects both here and abroad. For undergraduates, the result is exposure to scholars with extensive international experience and interests, to professors and students from other countries, and to courses whose content has a strongly international dimension. In an increasingly interdependent world, in a nation where a high percentage of high school seniors can't locate France on a map of Europe, the international character of the educational experience at our institutions will be of lifelong value to our students, and is of the greatest importance to the well-being of our nation.

5

The access of students to a greater variety of people and programs extends well beyond the classroom in a research university. Special kinds of experiences-honors programs, supplementary learning opportunities, career counseling programs, overseas study programs, and many others-often are possible only because of the size of the student body. Because each may be appropriate or appealing to only a small percentage of the total student body, a large population is required to sustain them. Our students also enjoy other options and opportunities: living/learning centers, language houses, cooperatives, and international centers represent only a few of the diverse choices of living experiences that can be found on our campuses in an abundance that is directly related to the size of the student body.

# 6

Scale plays a major role in the scope and variety of services and cocurricular opportunities available to our students. The quality of campus life has an undeniable influence on the effectiveness of undergraduate education. Cocurricular learning makes vital contributions to the cultural, emotional, physical, and social development of our students, contributing in significant ways to the total personal and intellectual growth of the undergraduate. Community is fostered at institutions like ours within residence halls, organized Greek units, and a myriad of off-campus housing arrangements. It is also developed through cocurricular activities for students of every interest, from athletics to Zen. Complemented by a full range of student support services, the clubs and organizations, cultural events, intramural sports, and community service projects available at our universities develop leadership and enrich the lives of our students. The role models encountered in these activities also contribute to the education of the whole student. An orchestra conductor, a drama director, an athletics coach, or a student affairs adviser can inspire a student's respect and add, often in unexpected ways, to the student's education and approach to life.

## Conclusion

One of the constant features of our universities is the continual process of reviewing and revising what we offer our undergraduate students and how we do it. At any given time each of our institutions is almost certain to be engaged in one or another of the many phases of the cycle examining current practices and programs, proposing changes, implementing approved changes, and evaluating the effects of the changes. It is probably true that no other single topic receives as much faculty attention at our universities today as does undergraduate education.

We hope that this description will help bring into clearer focus the unique capabilities of the research university to provide an excellent undergraduate education to all of its many and highly diverse students. We also hope that it will assist our faculties in their evaluations of their teaching, of the curricula, and of the entire undergraduate experience at our institutions. As a statement of the potential, not always fully realized in practice, for a full and rich education at our universities, it is intended to reflect the basic character of what we are and do, and to offer a possible template for ourselves and others in our continuing efforts to provide the very best undergraduate education of which our universities are capable.