

SUMMER COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

University of Michigan

August 22, 1982

by

Donald Kennedy, President

Stanford University

Public and Private: The Common Ground

President Shapiro, Regents, Guests, and Fellow Alumni-to-be:  
It is good to be back in Michigan. This morning someone asked me: "Why are you here?" I find it often helps, in responding to a difficult inquiry, to answer only the stated part of the question while avoiding its real import. Thus the celebrated thief Willie Sutton, for example, when asked why it was that he robbed banks, replied "Because that's where the money is."

So I could say that I am here because, being an ex-resident of Ann Arbor and the proud owner of 28 credit points from this university, I wanted to close a circle. And I am here also because of my admiration for your President, who asked me. Harold Shapiro owns a degree of national respect among his peers -- those of us, that is, who practice the possibly masochistic craft of running universities -- that is truly enviable.

Now, you will instantly recognize that as a Willie Sutton answer. I explained why I came, but what the questioner may have wanted to know is: "Why did they ask you?," or perhaps even "Why did they ask you?"

I honestly have no idea, but I will speculate. I suspect Harold may have believed that the president of a major private

university might have something useful to say to the graduates and friends of a major public university at this very critical time -- something, perhaps, about the arrangements we have made in this society for the support of higher learning, about the current threats to the quality of our enterprise, and about the roles of the public and private sections in guaranteeing its future safety. I certainly hope something like that was on his mind, because that's what I intend to talk about.

Let me, then, focus on the differences and similarities between private and public, using Stanford and Michigan as examples.

Much has been made of the differences, usually by private educators. William Rainey Harper, first president of the then-embryonic University of Chicago, used to refer to its neighbors in the Big Ten-to-be as "the great engines of public instruction." He pictured Chicago as a fragile object of great worth, in constant danger of being trampled by heedless hordes. The tactic of portraying public institutions as less sensitive and somehow less dedicated to excellence has not, I suspect, entirely disappeared from the repertoire of private university presidents, especially near the end of fund drives. But as you know well, it is possible to be very big and very good.

In Harper's time there was little distinction between the social purposes of public and private educational institutions. David Starr Jordan, first President of Stanford, was at the University of Indiana in 1890.

The day Senator Leland Stanford came to Bloomington to woo him away, the object of his search was out of town. Where was Jordan? In Urbana, giving a speech on the importance of the State university! In it he praised the growth of the State university as "an institution existing for all the people, and for no end except the purpose of public instruction." But he then pointed out the similarities between their fundamental aims and those of the existing private colleges: "In its early years the State university was, in aim and method, almost a duplicate of the denominational schools by which it was surrounded."

True to those beliefs, he founded at Stanford a private university at which -- to the amazement of every contemporary Stanford parent to whom I recite the story -- there was no tuition. Indeed the Stanford of 1895 was different in few significant ways from the neighboring, somewhat older University of California across the Bay.

The private universities have since developed strong values of independence and pluralism that they contribute to higher education in America. In particular, I think they have a special role associated with their status as trusts -- an obligation to hold, for the indefinite future, domains of knowledge, resources, or views that might be allowed -- or made -- to vanish if they were made more publicly accountable. As a complement, the State institutions have their particular dedication to breadth, to public service, to reaching-out.

But it is on similarities I want to focus today. The more striking attributes of Stanford and Michigan, I would argue, are ones that they share. Along with a handful of other universities, public and private, they have a deep commitment to the acquisition of new knowledge that accompanies their responsibility for disseminating the old. They are, accordingly, called "research universities." The two institutions we're talking about, along with perhaps ten others, are responsible for a large proportion of the innovation in this society. They receive most of the Federal funds for basic research, produce most of the original science -- including many of the applications that make U.S. agriculture and industry work -- and are responsible for a good deal of cultural creativity as well. Such places are the centers for quality graduate and professional education in the Nation, because we discovered nearly a century ago that training of that kind prospers best where original work is also conducted. The policy of brigading graduate training and research -- establishing what Suny Bergstrom has called the "democracy of American science" -- has made our research enterprise the most productive in the world.

The pursuit of that wise national policy has had a cumulative result that now virtually submerges one traditional distinction between private and public as it applied to places like Stanford and Michigan. So important and pervasive is support from the national government that it would not be unfair to call each of us Federal universities, especially with respect to the functions of research and graduate training.

A second area of increasing similarity -- and this may surprise you -- is how education is paid for. Most people think of private institutions as expensive, and as supported entirely from private sources. But State revenues do not meet most of the costs even of in-state undergraduates in an institution like this one. So private sources take much of the load. And in a private university like Stanford, conversely, over half the undergraduates receive part or all of their expenses in the form of financial aid -- mostly derived from private philanthropy, but some of it also from public funds.

In short, private and public payers are sharing the load in both places. Michigan and Stanford undergraduates -- especially those who happen to be members of minority groups, or who come from the less affluent part of American society -- depend upon direct aid and tax policies that have emerged from a carefully-developed national effort to improve access to higher education. That policy, crafted by the Congress over several decades and embodied in the Higher Education Act of 1965, is based upon two main premises. The first is that human resources are critical to the Nation's future, and that it is against our interest to exclude groups of people from contributing to that future simply because race or economic circumstances have handicapped them.

The second premise is that diversity itself is an important adjunct of the educational process. I explained that premise from Stanford's viewpoint in this way, in a letter to the Michigan parent of

one of our undergraduates: "(It is) our belief that students gain from one another a large fraction of what they take away from the college experience. If that is right, the composition of a student body -- like the quality of the faculty and equipment in the laboratories -- is an essential part of the education we provide... (and) we invest (through financial aid) in its quality just as we invest in the quality of the faculty."

Now, for both these reasons, a substantial national commitment has been made to guarantee access of our best young people to higher education -- not only in private universities, but in the state institutions as well-- where the full cost may, despite the lower tuition, still be well over half that in the expensive privates. Thus at Stanford and Michigan, at least in the seventies, Federal help was a substantial component of the financial aid mix for undergraduates. And for graduate students, of course, it loomed even larger.

But in the 1980's those Federal commitments are being unravelled. The direct campus-based student aid programs have been cut drastically, and the loan programs -- in many ways the most important of all -- have been made much less useful. The more fortunate private universities have been able to fill in behind the Reagan retreat from educational opportunity by redeploying private funds; and as a result we are able to retain our commitment to meet the full demonstrated financial need of every student we admit to Stanford. But other private universities, even some that are considered relatively wealthy, have been unable to do so.

And paradoxically, the Administration's abandonment of past access policies has been even harder on the public institutions -- the ones nominally intended for all the people. As the New Federalism returns financial burdens to the States, State institutions face the double whammy of less direct Federal support for higher education, and harder-pressed State budgets. In economically troubled regions like

yours, it is requiring heroic efforts just to keep afloat. Already minority enrollment in many of America's public institutions has dropped alarmingly. It would not be surprising, though surely ironic, if the private universities turned out for a while to be society's most important academic reservoirs for ethnic and economic diversity.

Now, what is being offered by way of replacement help? More and more insistently, those who are dismantling the Federal higher education programs are recommending a new 'fix': called tuition tax credits.

This program is designed to help parents pay for school or college by crediting the cost of tuition against their income tax; it is billed as "free choice," and purports to help the independent educational sector by offering tax incentives to private tuition-payers.

As one whose institution would theoretically stand to benefit, I want to leave no doubt about my distaste for the entire notion. It produces a thinly-spread immediate benefit that will not make the difference between anyone's attending and not attending a good school or college. And it sells out the whole notion of financial aid based upon need. What any responsible private college administrator ought to do with a tuition tax credit, if the Congress is foolish enough to pass one, is to recoup the funds through an extra tuition increase and re-award them as need-based financial aid. The purpose of Federal help with tuition is to make sure that the most capable Americans get to college, and tuition tax credits won't do that. They are thus not one bit better for Stanford than they are for Michigan, and we ought to oppose them together.

Indeed, I would argue that we have much to join forces over. At the top of the list is the dismantling of the Federal support for access to higher education, about which I've just been talking. Next would be the cooperative defense of our service as research universities

-- centers of graduate training and of the production of new knowledge. Future productivity gains in this society will depend heavily upon the kind of intellectual capital our institutions are now providing.

To these I would add a third program, one on which you have, as a public institution, a rather better start than we. It is the need for the universities to support and encourage the quality of public education at all levels. In this area the great state universities have established a powerful tradition of benign influence. Few examples are more laudable than the extraordinary writing program run by Professor Daniel Fader here, which extends into Michigan high schools. It has been widely copied, as it deserves to be.

Despite the existence of such programs in places like Michigan, the general record of concern about public primary and secondary education in the great universities is disappointingly meager, and it promises to become worse as the schools of education continue to fall into neglect. We have decided to make a major commitment to a study of the schools at Stanford, an effort in which the Dean of Education and I are trying to involve a broad array of faculty members outside the School of Education in a project led from within it. Unless the significant institutions of higher education demonstrate an interest in this problem, we risk perpetuating a situation in which only the less able students contemplate teaching careers. Two years ago, those college students intending to serve in public education had test scores averaging more than 40 points below the mean for all students. We cannot tolerate that circumstance for very long.

Therefore I want to say to you, as I have said to our own new graduates, that teaching and other forms of public service deserve your serious attention. That is one of the three important convictions that I hope you have drawn from your time in this great university. It arises out of a sense of involvement in public purposes, a sense that is

particularly alive in places like this one; and it arises also from an intellectual appreciation of the continuity between knowledge and its application for public benefit.

What are the other two? First, I hope you have gained some personal experience with the extraordinary richness of a great university -- for the complex and grand venture that is the search for knowledge. It is an opportunity available in only a few places. And second, I hope you will gain the strength of confidence in the abilities your own education has brought you. It is one thing to know, and quite another thing to be able to apply that knowledge to unique problems, over unfamiliar intellectual terrain. You are better able than you may know to do that.

So in conclusion, I wish you well in these three ways: I wish you the joy of discovering the extent of your capacities, the confidence to apply them broadly, and the will to employ them in the public interest.