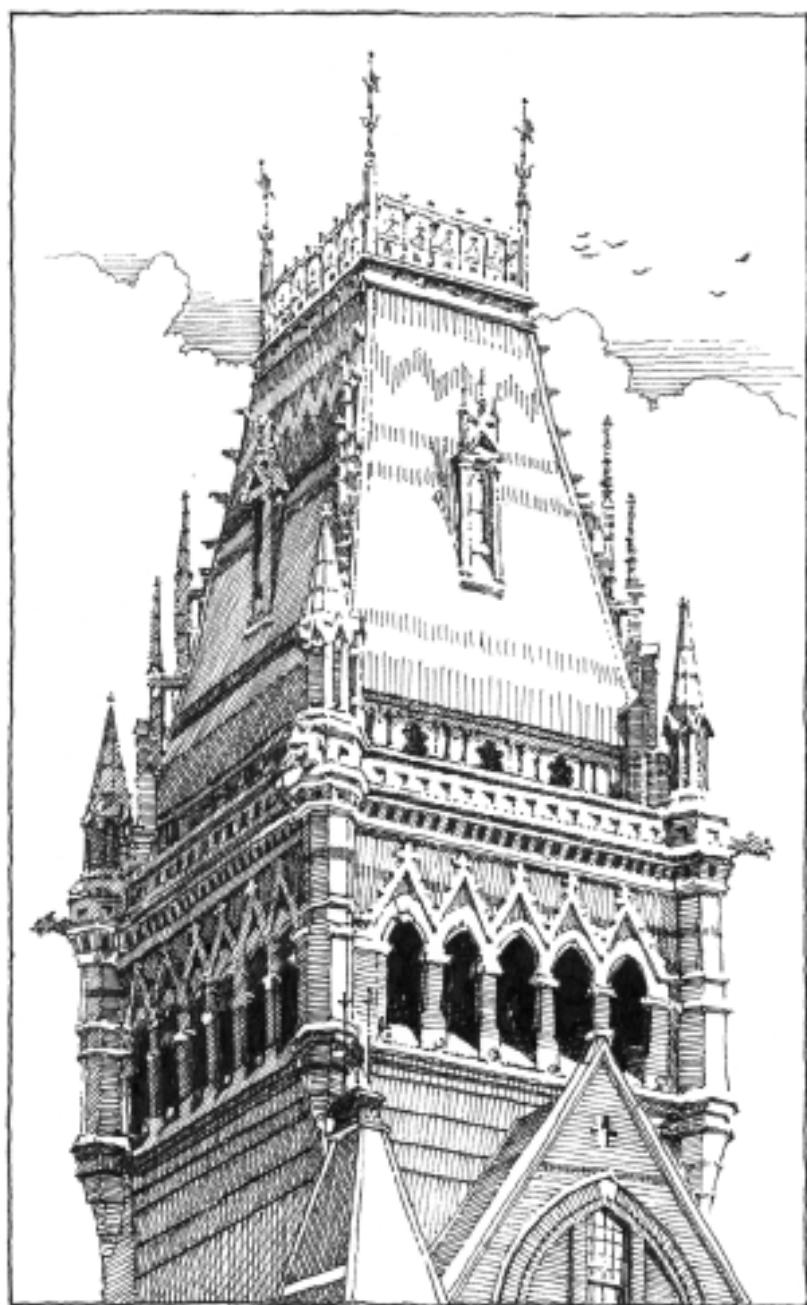


POINTING OUR THOUGHTS



NEIL L. RUDENSTINE

POINTING OUR THOUGHTS

REFLECTIONS ON HARVARD AND

HIGHER EDUCATION + 1991-2001

FOREWORD BY HANNA HOLBORN GRAY

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS

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Frontispiece: The Memorial Hall tower, destroyed in a 1956 fire, was rebuilt in 1999, and stands as a symbol of the University’s renewal and restoration of its campus. A new student dining hall and commons are now also part of Memorial Hall.

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Foreword

THE PRESENT VOLUME stands as a healthy corrective to the familiar complaint pervading contemporary critiques of higher education which contends that we have seen a sad decline in the stature and role of the university president. Once upon a time, it is said, giants strode the academic earth bestowing on it their gifts of eloquence and moral fervor, inspiring the public with their views on weighty issues of the day, exemplifying a wisdom and authority that offered beacons to the social order.

By contrast, today's president is pictured as an administrative manager more concerned with money-raising than with learning, a cautious conciliator of diverse constituencies more intent on placating than provoking, a spokesman for the corporate interests of the university rather than the leader of an autonomous community of principled commitment.

This commonly repeated perception has taken on a life of its own as a kind of emblematic shorthand for decrying the ills of, or expressing the anxieties associated with, the developments surrounding universities in our time. Institutions have become ever more complex and diffuse. The pace of discovery in knowledge and its technologies has been ever more accelerated. The profu-

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sion (and confusion) of expectations placed on universities has become ever more demanding. The ethical and social dilemmas emanating from the potential goals and uses of education and research seem increasingly difficult to resolve. The questions of the appropriate relationship of universities to government and to the commercial world appear irreconcilably contested. Disputes over the quality and effectiveness, the costs and benefits, the privileges and equities of higher education have multiplied.

In the midst of such bewilderment, it is refreshing to find a clear and penetrating intelligence that conscientiously accepts and confronts those problems and discordances of the contemporary academic world, celebrates its enlarged capacities, and refuses withdrawal into the nostalgia that would substitute abstract claims and simplistic nostrums or conventional rhetoric for genuine engagement with profound complexities and the determination to undertake the tasks implied in a constructive sense of the future.

Ours is an age that requires not so much the university founders of the past, distinguished as they were, but re-founders and renewers, participants in a collegial enterprise, definers of institutional purpose, spokesmen for universities and the academic ethos itself. Today's leaders among university presidents are those who look steadily and carefully to issues that, precisely because the issues are neither fashionable nor susceptible to easy solution, require the utmost consistency in analysis and persuasive communication.

Neil Rudenstine has been such a president. To read his thoughtful and beautifully crafted speeches is to hear the voice of a teacher deeply committed to the vocation of opening minds to reflection and insight, listening intensely to his colleagues and entering with them into a continuing process of intellectual dialogue, sharing the convictions and perplexities of the search for understanding. It is the voice of the humanist whose deep engagement with texts and ideas and language is always respectful of

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nuance and uncertainty, sensitive to the living fabric of history and tradition, generous to other ways of disciplinary study and attentive to the connections among them. It is the voice, too, of the academic citizen for whom the individual freedom of the scholar and student is paramount and for whom, at the same time, the ideal of an academic community has overriding moral power.

President Rudenstine has sustained and strengthened Harvard, preserving and extending its special character and mission, setting and meeting high standards of ambition and accomplishment. At the same time, he has made it his profession to meditate on the large themes of teaching and learning, of the essential values and conditions of academic life, of the nature of its institutions and the changes they must take into account. In doing so, he has fortified not only Harvard, but has served all our universities by laying out so eloquently just why they matter and what matters about them.

The last decade has seen a great growth in resources and programs at Harvard. The campaign that President Rudenstine led has already become legendary for its scope and its success. More important than the remarkable sums raised, however, is the academic purpose that drove the campaign's planning and appeal. President Rudenstine seized the opportunity to see the University whole, to support the initiatives of its different constituent parts and simultaneously to stimulate inquiry into how their intellectual riches might join further toward configurations and collaborations that would cross boundaries and carve paths that could link Harvard's internal neighborhoods to one another and produce new forms of learning and investigation.

At the outset, in his inaugural address, and insistently onward, President Rudenstine set out priorities that would foster the goals of the larger university, of liberal education, of serious scholarship and research, of excellence in professional training. Those priorities have to do in the first instance with honoring and pro-

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tecting the conditions within which a university can flourish: the uncompromising conditions of academic freedom and untrammelled debate, together with those of civility and tolerance and a willingness to acknowledge the possible limitations to which even the most brilliant and talented minds may be subject.

Beyond these essentials, President Rudenstine's priorities have been focused on expanding and securing access for students of all backgrounds by the provision of financial aid based on a policy of need-blind admissions, on advocating the educational benefits of affirmative action and an increased diversity of the Harvard community, on extending the international role of the University, encouraging interfaculty initiatives, and bringing the fruits of the revolution in information technology to the service of education and research. Under President Rudenstine's leadership, financial aid has been significantly enlarged, new international initiatives created, a series of interfaculty programs established, and information technology and its attendant questions brought to center stage.

New and wide-ranging goals have been set for the sciences. The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, building on the legacy of Radcliffe College, has created a major and promisingly interdisciplinary center within Harvard that could never have been realized without President Rudenstine's patient guidance. Important physical renovations underscore the adaptation of older facilities to new needs, possibilities, and technologies. So, for example, the humanities have been brought together in a new home at the Barker Center; Widener Library is undergoing massive reconstruction, and the Yard dormitories have been renovated.

President Rudenstine's stewardship of Harvard reveals an unfaltering attention to explicating and keeping faith with Harvard's history and special character while pointing to those elements of change that carry with them both risk and opportunity and that need to be debated and carefully assimilated. A reverence for reasoned discussion, combined with a sensibility that gives place to

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imagination, taste, and feeling; a delight in the individuality fostered by Harvard's environment, combined with the exhortation to high standards of community responsibility; a grace and generosity in giving credit to others, combined with a confidence that the best thinking of all will prevail; a willingness to live with complexity and ambiguity, combined with the sure conviction that there are principles and truths that must be defended in the university's cause; such are some of the characteristics that emerge through the words spoken at so many different times and occasions over the past decade.

Add a touch of pomposity-defying wit, blend in clarity, integrity and modesty, mix in humane sympathy, and season the whole with a profound love of learning and belief in the incalculable value of an always elusive wisdom: there you have a portrait, an unintended self-portrait, as it were, of Neil Rudenstine, a teacher who has taken the University and the purposes of education as his subject and their quality as his presidential mandate. President Rudenstine's service to Harvard and to higher education has been founded in the vision his voice conveys and its realization in the vigorous institutional life of a great university.

— *Hanna Holborn Gray*
President Emeritus
The University of Chicago

