



Gavazzi, S. M., & Gee, E. G. (2018). *Land-grant universities for the future: Higher education for the common good*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

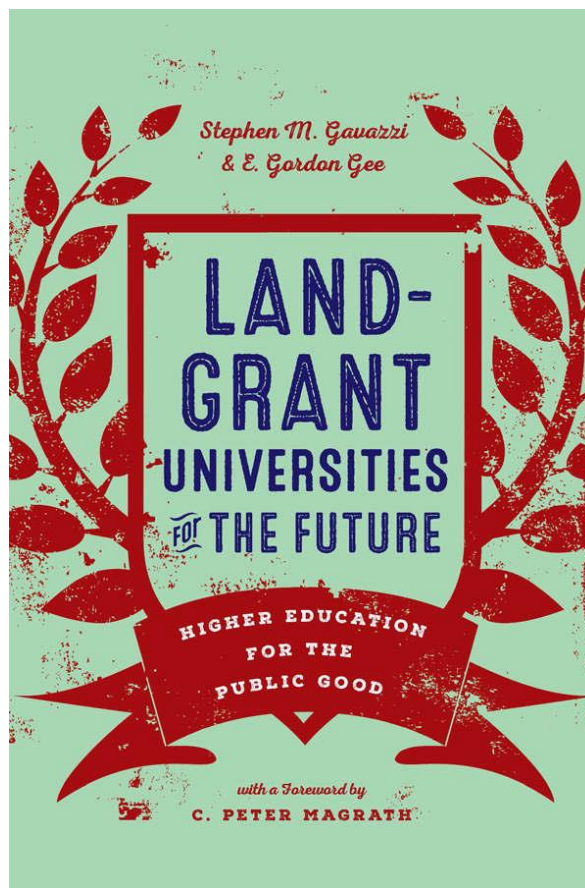
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The problem, as Gavazzi and Gee note, is that “public support for higher education has been on the decline ... this erosion of support [is] a symptom of an imbalanced (i.e., nonreciprocal) partnership between campuses and communities,” which “provide[s] the public] far too much leeway to interpret our activities as simply self-serving (and therefore not a public good)” (pp. 27-28). The results of this loss of public support are widely recognized and are strongly felt. But what can be done? This is the central question that undergirds Gavazzi and Gee’s *Land-Grant Universities for the Future*. Their answer is relatively simple to conceptualize if complicated to enact. Land-grant universities must engage deeply with their communities in order to regain public trust and relevance, as well as to shore up their future.

The research substance of the book comes from interviews that the authors conducted with 27 presidents and chancellors of land-grant institutions and draws heavily on the authors’ previous work and experience



(particularly Gavazzi, 2014, 2015). These interviews offer valuable information about the present experience of land-grant universities. Throughout the volume, the foundational presupposition is that land-grant universities will only function well when they remember their mandate to educate the broadest range of students and to craft high-quality teaching, research, and service that benefits the community in which the institution is located. In this regard, the authors cast the land-grant university as a “servant university” above all else (pp. 31-34) and advocate for a structure by which all the activities of the institution provide direct benefit to the community. To make this claim, the authors rely on several separate lines of argument. First, they retell the foundation of land-grant universities, highlighting the “original purpose” for the creation of these institutions. Second, they marshal interviews with land-grant university leaders to identify the primary strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) faced by these universities going forward. Finally, they suggest some ways for land-grant universities to move forward.

Gavazzi and Gee retell the history of the founding of land-grant universities via the First Morrill Act of 1862, the Hatch Act of 1887, the Second Morrill Act of 1890, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. This history highlights what they call a covenant existing between the “land-grant institutions and the communities they were designed to serve” (p. 36). This covenant, according to Gavazzi and Gee, requires community engagement. Land-grant universities have often operationalized this type of engagement through the Cooperative Extension Service system, but Gavazzi and Gee suggest that the mandate goes further. They propose that in addition to agricultural extension services, land-grant universities should provide a robust catalog of applied research from varied disciplines. This focus on wide-ranging community engagement parallels other research, notably that by the

Kellogg Commission on the Future of Land-Grant Universities, the Carnegie Foundation’s classification for community engagement, and the Association for Public and Land-grant Universities. These initiatives demonstrate the value of “public engagement” broadly defined, and the broader notions of the “public good” that land-grant universities serve.

Interviews with the presidents and chancellors identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for land-grant universities and the results of these interviews form the content of chapters 3-6. Overall, Gavazzi and Gee identify seven themes that emerged from the interviews:

1. Concerns about funding declines versus the need to create efficiencies;
2. Research prowess versus teaching and service excellence;
3. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake versus a more applied focus;
4. The focus on rankings versus an emphasis on access and affordability;
5. Meeting the needs of rural communities versus the needs of a more urbanized America;
6. Global reach versus closer-to-home impact;
7. The benefits of higher education versus the devaluation of a college diploma (pp. 59-60).

Each of these themes is set against the covenant that the authors argue exists between the public and higher education, which is read through the marriage metaphor introduced earlier in the book (pp. 25-29). The central idea is that a harmonious relationship does not exist between the land-grant university and the communities they serve. This disharmony is the source of virtually all the challenges that land-grant universities face. The way forward, then, is to restore harmony by reinstating the covenant, that provided a framework for the original aim of land-grant universities.

Each of the themes above is examined against this covenant or harmonious relationship ideal. Efficient funding decisions at universities and the declining public financial support for land-grant universities are understood to be a tacit admission that these universities have decreased value to the public. The question of teaching vs. research is addressed through the lens of public expectations; the university should be a place of quality teaching. Basic research is important, sure, but applied research provides more direct economic benefit to communities, and so should be prioritized. Land-grant universities were created to educate “children of toil” and so, affordability should be a primary concern, not rankings. Rural communities have been the focus of land-grant educational outreach through extension services, but similar focus needs to be centered on urban communities that have different needs and so would benefit from varied outreach. Globalization is seen as a violation of this public trust, with the question in the mind of the public being, “why work globally when there are obvious and persistent American problems that higher education could work to solve?” As to the devaluation of college education, Gavazzi and Gee chalk that up to a failure of land-grant institutions to educate their graduates on the land-grant mission, and the value they add to both education and the community.

Of course, institutional change is difficult in higher education. Gavazzi and Gee recognize this basic fact and devote considerable space to understanding the difficulties and envisioning a way forward. Chapter 4 focuses on the way that governing boards, elected officials, and accreditation impact both institutional change and the potential for change. Boards are acknowledged as powerful advocates for the university in its community, and as providing crucial fiscal oversight. However, the main challenge identified is educating the board on the unique mission that land-grant universities have.

Further, rankings and research enter into the discussion because they present themselves as abstract metrics of institutional success. Gavazzi and Gee, in contrast, suggest that better measures of excellence in service, applied research, and teaching are necessary; their lack is particularly felt in the conversation about board decisions. Chapter 5 takes up the role faculty play in living out the land-grant mission. In this section, the current practice of tenure is put forward as a central threat to the future of land-grant universities. Gavazzi and Gee are not calling for an abandonment of tenure, rather using Ernest Boyer’s (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered*, they call for a re-organization and evolution of the standard metrics marking faculty excellence: teaching, research, and service.

Gavazzi and Gee are also very critical of the universities’ increasing focus on more and more specialized and elite research, claiming that the “lack of emphasis on teaching excellence is troubling” (p. 69). In their view, the land-grant university has an equal obligation to provide high-quality instruction of students. Teaching and service should, in their view, be valued equally with research. Also, their scheme places the local community at the center of each of these central activities. So, “teaching” becomes “learning” (to reflect lifelong and bi-directional learning), and then “talent” to describe continued investment in human capital. “Research” becomes “discovery,” but then moves on to “innovation” – this category contains both basic and applied research. Finally, “service” is first cast as “engagement” (in both the community and university) but then becomes “place” – to more fully capture the contextual approach to service.

Increasing community engagement thus frames Gavazzi and Gee’s response to each of the challenges that face land-grant universities. To this end, they offer four ways in which this engagement is operationalized:

First, there is the need to *generate scholarship* that focuses empirical attention either on the act of engagement itself or on the product of the engagement. Second, there is the need to *integrate efforts* in ways that combine various aspects of teaching, research, and service within each engagement effort. Third, the activities must be *mutually beneficial* to both campus and community stakeholders ... And fourth, engagement must support the *democratic ideals* of our nation (p. 128).

These action steps are a fitting summary of the crux of the argument. In my opinion, community engagement in the way that Gavazzi and Gee describe it is essential for the future of universities, and not just land-grant universities. This part of their argument is quite compelling, even if it is difficult to fully operationalize.

Despite the compelling nature of Gavazzi and Gee's community-focused vision for land-grant universities, a few problems do present themselves. The first is one that the authors note themselves, observing that "public higher education in America is not a national organization, but rather a very state-specific one" (p. 95). In addition, land-grant universities are not explicitly recognized by those outside of executive leadership as having a distinctive mission when compared with other public higher education institutions. This is a point that Gavazzi and Gee also recognize in their discussion of how elected officials often do not know which of the universities in their states are land-grant universities (pp. 106-7). The reality is that different universities enact the land-grant vision in varied ways, and with varying levels of success. Certainly, fidelity to this mission is one consideration, but universities serve a variety of stakeholders and experience different pressures. While there is value in returning to the land-grant ideal by engaging with one's community more

seriously, this is by necessity an individual enterprise. Each community where these land-grant universities reside is different. If community engagement is at the heart of the land-grant future, much more effort needs to be placed on developing mechanisms for recognizing the needs of individual communities and moving to operationalize university resources to address them.

A second and more critical problem is that students are notably absent from this volume. Chapter 6 is called "Our Students: Vanguard in the community," but what appears here is remarks by land-grant university leaders about their students. The chapter includes comments about the necessity of accessibility to education, about the benefits of service-learning and civic engagement, and about the essential role that alumni can play in advocating for and shaping the kind of community partnerships that Gavazzi and Gee advocate throughout the book. What is missing, however, is the voice of the student. If students genuinely are the vanguard in the community, their ideas need to be solicited, and their perspective needs to be included in the conversation about the future of the institutions built to serve them. I would also suggest here that the syllabus that appears as Appendix A, presented as an example of a general education course that is "an intentional way of building land-grant advocates and leaders for the twenty-first century" (p. 149), misses the opportunity to involve students meaningfully in solving the problem of the future of higher education. Problem Based Learning (PBL) seems an ideally suited pedagogy for this type of class and would only require posing questions about the future of land-grant universities to students. But perhaps this criticism belies my own instructional preference toward critical pedagogy and discovery learning.

Finally, it is worth setting the authors' community-focused future for land-grant universities in the context of some other

scholarly works on the future of higher education more broadly. The community-focused conclusion bears resemblance to that of Baker and Bilbro (2017), who begin with the work of Wendell Berry and argue that higher education has the obligation to tell students “stories about rooted, contented lives; about the grateful, loving pursuit of wisdom; about people who sacrificed their private ambitions to serve the health of their local place” (p. 191). These are different arguments, to be sure, but are connected by their ambition to increase the health of communities. Also, several other recent monographs describe an alternative future for higher education. The history of the foundation of land-grant universities described in this volume benefits from the broader history of American higher education as told, for one example, by Davidson (2017). Specifically, Gavazzi’s and Gee’s important criticisms about the ambiguity of excellent

teaching and service benefit from more information about the smaller structures of university teaching (like credit hours and workload requirements).

To conclude, Gavazzi’s and Gee’s book is a welcome addition to a more extensive body of research about the future of higher education. Their focus on a specific and unique future for land-grant universities points to the fact that the future of higher education in America cannot be uniform or monolithic. Land-grant universities have a different mission and so should look different from other institutions of higher education. Further, their community-centered mission also adds to the conversation. Finally, the criticism of the promotion and tenure process that is centered on research and rankings is particularly compelling and is another indication that the one-size-fits-all approach to higher education is not working and deserves increased scrutiny.

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