The Big Picture

Theodora J. Kalikow

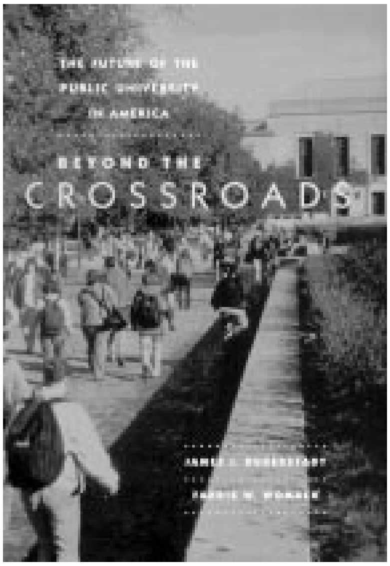
The Future of the Public University in America: Beyond the Crossroads, James J. Duderstadt and Farris W. Womack, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, $39.95.

As president and chief financial officer, respectively, of the University of Michigan, James J. Duderstadt and Farris W. Womack helped steer the university through a tempestuous period. In *Beyond the Crossroads*, the two share some of what they learned.

Their point of view is shaped by the fact that the University of Michigan is a *mega-public* university, with tens of thousands of students, thousands of faculty and staff, several professional schools and a health center, and a reserve account larger than many public colleges' entire instructional budgets. Readers should keep in mind that when Duderstadt and Womack write "university," they have this sort of institution in mind. Comprehensive state universities (medium-sized or small), public liberal arts colleges, community colleges or any other form of public higher education institution aren't within their experience.

On some topics, this does not matter. For example, the discussion of tuition policy and university financing is excellent. The authors give convincing arguments for the high tuition/high aid strategy, noting that recent federal policies of loans and tax credits skew aid toward the politically influential middle class, as do state programs of merit aid. Both strategies take a disproportionately high amount of tax revenues from lower-income groups and do not return tuition benefits to them in an equitable fashion. Public policymakers should take note of what should be obvious: "…educational access and opportunity are achieved not through subsidizing those who can afford to pay but, rather, by providing financial assistance to those who cannot." The authors claim that institutions will be stronger if they do not "hold tuition levels down to unrealistically low levels." Rather, they should "use additional tuition revenue to fund strong financial aid programs."

Beyond the Crossroads features an excellent discussion about the nature of public governing boards, the relationship of board members to state politics, and the resulting contrast with the behavior and traditions of boards of private higher education institutions. Duderstadt and Womack do a good job explaining why public board members tend to act as watchdogs rather than stewards, viewing their responsibilities as primarily toward the wider public or the governor who appointed them, not the institution itself.



On other topics, however, the authors' experience limits their discussion. For example, there is much in this book about the difficulty of bringing about campus change, the silo-like nature of faculty and departmental cultures and the difficulty in getting communication to occur across an institution. All true if you are at a huge place. But if you can bring your entire staff (and sometimes the student body too) together in one big space to discuss an issue or seek views on a topic, you are in a much different realm. Likewise, faculty and staff at smaller institutions, while they share some of the culture of their disciplines, are much more likely to be invested in the institution and act accordingly. Policies and practices (for instance, standards for tenure and promotion) may more easily be crafted to reward service to the external community, entrepreneurial activity, directing undergraduate research or whatever fits the institution's mission. Readers who don't happen to work at a mega-public will recognize the symptoms that Duderstadt and Womack describe, but they'll also know that the picture is not as bleak as the authors suggest.

The authors' limited viewpoint also leads them to ignore the influence that the mega-publics have on the rest of the public sector. For instance, any consideration given to the role of the flagship institution in a larger state university system is limited to dealing with the nuisance value of having other institutions which may try to take your resources and push your assumed higher quality towards a lowest common denominator. There is no thought—to go to the other extreme—that the flagship campus may exhibit symptoms of illness for which the other institutions in the system are made to take the medicine! And while there is mention of forming "alliances" with other institutions to deal with the big changes coming in public higher education, no convincing details are given.

Further, the mega-publics send out many new Ph.D.s who will take their places on the faculties of other kinds of public institutions. These new recruits bring with them up-to-date disciplinary expertise but usually not much experience in teaching and little understanding of the kind of college or university in which they have landed. This means the receiving institutions have to do a lot of re-education and acculturation. Some of this is inevitable and good. But how much? Calling for change in higher education, even change in Ph.D. preparation, while ignoring some of the major "customers" for new faculty, does not compute.

Finally, a major aim of this book is to help readers prepare for the future of our enterprise. I would say that success is mixed. The overview of where we are today is thorough and illuminating, with the caveats mentioned before. The current state of the mega-university, the changes that are taking place in public financing, public opinion, technology, the larger society and its need for learning, are all well-described. But readers may wish for more new ideas on how to cope with the trends and issues that the authors identify.

For example, the authors mention the changing nature of learners: from traditional-age students who have grown up with instant messaging and multimedia to older learners who need to participate in higher education for the first or the fifth time for "just in time" new learning. But how public higher education will or should accommodate all these learners, the authors do not say.

One good strategy is mentioned: "letting 100 flowers bloom," supporting many different attempts to deal with emerging issues, and letting the fittest ones survive. This approach does need to be watched carefully, especially in smaller institutions where the mission has already been focused and money is in short supply. Still, the university is about ideas—incubating a few self-reflective new ones about its own role and function has to be helpful.

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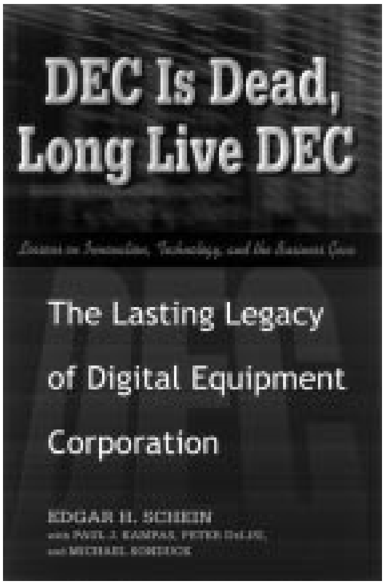
DEC'd Out

Alan R. Earls

DEC Is Dead, Long Live DEC: The Lasting Legacy of Digital Equipment Corporation, Edgar H. Schein with Peter S. DeLisi, Paul J. Kampas, and Michael M. Sonduck, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003, $27.95

In a few short years, Digital Equipment Corporation has faded from the headlines and the consciousness of New England. But for at least the last half of its 40-odd year life span, Digital—or DEC, as it was often known—was the great exemplar for new businesses and a symbol of regional rebirth. Indeed, until its final years, it was headquartered in a recycled woolen mill in Maynard, Mass., that symbolically connected it to the faded primordial enterprises of every New England mill town. And to that humble headquarters, politicians, pundits and an army of customers trekked—to wonder, to buy and to emulate the second biggest computer-maker in the world.

DEC's achievements were legendary. Starting in 1957 with the help of an almost penurious $70,000 investment from pioneer venture fund, American Research & Development, the company gave life to founder Ken Olsen's vision of computing for the masses—defined at that time as almost anyone in engineering, research or education with a modest budget.



Almost from its inception, the company was profitable and growing. In an era when computer shipments at giant "mainframe" companies such as IBM were often measured in the single or double digits, DEC engineers produced handy and affordable machines with unit sales measured at first in the hundreds, then the thousands and eventually the hundreds of thousands. In short, Digital was a star as both a business and as a technical innovator, building successes in large part on its pioneering effort to commercialize the academic mode of inquiry, research and development that Olsen had learned as a graduate student at MIT.

DEC's reputation and fortune rose in tandem until the mid-1980s when the industry it had helped create suddenly bounded off in new directions—the personal computer, in particular. Digital's response to these new challenges was typically Digital—with lots of creativity and lots of new products and, alas, a complete lack of focus or sense of urgency.

Under a cloud, Olsen departed in 1992. The company struggled to regain momentum for a few more years and finally, in 1998 succumbed to the seductions of PC-giant, Compaq. Today, what's left of Digital is merged deep within California-based Hewlett-Packard, which acquired Compaq in 2002. To be sure, a fair number of the old Digital buildings—now sporting HP signs—still dot the landscape of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, but only a fraction of the former employees remain and the magic is gone.

DEC is Dead: Long Live DEC offers an objective analysis of how this once-tiny company grew to employ more than 125,000 people in a few decades, how it created its legendary products, how it spread management across the business world and how it ultimately failed. (Disclaimer: I worked as a consultant at Digital in its last years of its independent existence.)

Edgar H. Schein, the principal author of *DEC is Dead*, is an emeritus management professor at MIT's Sloan School and founding editor of *Reflections*, the journal of the Society for Organizational Learning. He consulted for DEC from 1966 to 1992. Fellow authors Peter S. DeLisis and Paul J. Kampas are both consultants with academic connections, the former at Santa Clara University and the latter at Boston College, while Michael M. Sonduck heads a management consulting firm.

DEC is Dead: Long Live DEC will be of interest to students of management, students of business history and academics since the story revolves primarily around the creation of a modern, research-based corporation inspired by the research university. DEC, for example, largely eschewed a hierarchical structure: typical business functions were submerged in a larger culture where employees were more or less collegial co-equals.

Unlike most businesses, say the authors, DEC did not function by command but by consensus among individuals and between groups, and consensus among managers. Even the ultimate consumers of the company's products were