

The Association of American Universities: A Century of Service to Higher Education 1900-2000

Ann Leigh Speicher
AAU Public Affairs Officer

The Association of American Universities (AAU) was founded in February 1900, at a two-day conference that 14 of the nation's leading Ph.D.-granting institutions held at the University of Chicago.

The idea for the conference came from University of California President Benjamin Ide Wheeler, who had been proposing the formation of something like AAU in correspondence with Harvard President Charles Eliot and others. The purpose of the organization, in the words of the constitution that was adopted at the Chicago conference, was to consider "matters of common interest relating to graduate study."

The founders had quite specific matters in mind. In the quarter-century before 1900, American higher education had begun transforming itself using the German university model, which emphasized advanced study and laboratory research. Starting with the Johns Hopkins University in 1876, American universities had grafted the German structure onto the American college model, providing in a single institution both undergraduate education and advanced graduate study and research. Thus was born the American research university.

But American institutions got little respect from the major universities in Europe. U.S. students were flocking to European universities for graduate degrees, and the European view of U.S. academic degrees was less than flattering.

The problem was that unlike in Europe, higher education in America was decentralized and largely unregulated; diploma mills proliferated and even shaky institutions could call themselves "universities" and award Ph.D.s. Some institutions, for example, allowed Ph.D. candidates to pursue courses without showing up on campus and to take exams at home under supervision of a proctor. This lack of standards and consistency was hurting the reputations of the more demanding U.S. universities.

Thus, the conveners of the conference that led to the formation of AAU—the presidents of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and the University of California—said in their letter of invitation to the conference that their goals were:

(1) to bring about "a greater uniformity of the conditions under which students may become candidates for higher degrees in different American universities, thereby solving the problem of migration,"

(2) to "raise the opinion entertained abroad of our own Doctor's degree," and

(3) to "raise the standard of our own weaker institutions."¹

(Letter of Invitation to be inserted here, with photos of 14 university presidents in the general vicinity)

In the words of historian Roger Geiger, “Thus, the creation of the AAU was a declaration by the leading American universities of independence and equality with regard to European universities as well as an endeavor to guarantee the value of their product against ‘cheaper’ foreign and domestic competition.”²

There is room for argument about the role AAU itself has played over the years in achieving these goals, but there can be no doubt that these goals have been achieved, and then some. Today, America's universities face new kinds of problems but the best among them—many of which are AAU members—are regarded everywhere as the finest in the world.

Not surprisingly, given the nature of their goals, the founders of AAU stipulated that membership in the organization was to be by invitation only, on the basis of merit. As it still does today, an invitation to join required the assent of three-quarters of the current members.

At first, AAU grew quickly. Of the original 14 universities, 11 were private institutions and three were public. By 1909, eight more universities had joined, all of them public, making the composition of the organization half public and half private.

Between 1909 and today, AAU has grown slowly but steadily, to the point where it now comprises 61 universities, still roughly half public and half private. Among the members are the two Canadian universities added in 1926: McGill University and the University of Toronto.

Over the association's history, the only institution to leave AAU was Clark University, which decided to leave the organization in 1999. Clark was one of the original founders of AAU, but over the years, the institution's goals had diverged from the strongly research-oriented goals of other AAU institutions.

The Road From Accreditation to Federal Relations

Starting in 1914 and for many years afterwards, the association functioned in no small part as an accreditation agency. Almost as soon as AAU was founded, German universities began using membership in AAU as their measure of quality for graduate school admissions. Recognizing that this was unfair to many fine U.S. colleges and universities, and not wishing to expand significantly AAU's membership, the association took on the task of providing foreign universities with a list of colleges whose graduates could be considered adequately prepared to undertake graduate study. This list was known as the "AAU Accepted List," and the association certified not only its own member institutions but also other institutions throughout the nation. The work, handled by the AAU graduate deans, included extensive fact-finding and site visits. Although regional accrediting organizations were starting up by the 1920s, none carried the

weight of the AAU Accepted List. Over the years, the AAU list was a continual source of controversy both within and outside the association.³

AAU was initiated by university presidents and in its early years presidents were involved actively in the association's business. Those who guided AAU in these early years included Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton, who presided over the association's 1910 conference. But with the increasing focus on accreditation matters, many presidents stopped attending AAU meetings. Beginning in the late teens and continuing into the 1940s, AAU meetings were primarily forums for the graduate deans to discuss accreditation and common problems in graduate education.⁴

Then in 1948, the AAU graduate deans proposed to expand accreditation from undergraduate to graduate programs. While the proposal had the laudable goal of maintaining quality in graduate programs as post-war students poured into graduate schools, it would have required massive new resources and changed the nature of the association. The plan was roundly rejected by the presidents and prompted a radical reassessment of the association.

By early 1949, AAU had dropped its accrediting role altogether, and split the organization into two, maintaining AAU as a presidentially based organization and creating the Association of Graduate Schools in the Association of American Universities (AGS) as a new forum for the graduate deans. University of Virginia dean James Southall Wilson quipped, "We have been present at one of the greatest surgical operations in history, when by a Caesarian operation, a parent organization was born of its daughter."⁵

By 1949, too, the association's policy focus had changed significantly. In its early years, AAU was primarily concerned with internal higher education matters. But starting in the late 1930s, and ever since, the association has been increasingly focused on the relationship between higher education and the federal government. That trend was hardly surprising, since it was in the late 1930's, with the New Deal in full swing and war clouds looming in Europe, that the federal government began turning more and more to the nation's universities for their policy and technology expertise. By the 1946 meeting, the AAU presidents came to believe they were not meeting their obligations as university leaders and needed a forum for dealing with national issues.

AAU remains today very much a presidents' organization. The association is governed by an executive committee of presidents who not only oversee its financial and operational affairs but also provide the Washington office staff with general guidance on policy issues. AAU maintains a variety of presidential committees and task forces that analyze and develop policies in specific areas.

Given the fact that the presidents had only just reasserted their role in AAU, it is not surprising that in 1949 they scrapped a plan to celebrate the association's 50th anniversary in 1950.⁶ The presidents had had relatively little to do with operation of the association over most of that half-century.

A Golden Era of Funding and New Relationships with the Federal Government

During World War II, universities made important research breakthroughs that helped win the war and laid the basis for sustaining federal support of basic research at universities. Among their champions was Vannevar Bush, director of the wartime Office of Scientific Research and Development. In his famous report, *Science—The Endless Frontier*, Bush wrote that this expanded federal investment was necessary because:

“The publicly and privately supported colleges and research institutes are the centers of basic research...As long as they are vigorous and healthy and their scientists are free to pursue the truth wherever it may lead, there will be a flow of new scientific knowledge to those who can apply it to practical problems in Government, in industry, or elsewhere.”⁷

Bush’s report led eventually to creation of the National Science Foundation in 1950. But, in the meantime, federal mission agencies also had seen the importance of funding basic university research. Immediately following the war, the Office of Naval Research (ONR) transformed itself into an “ideal patron of science.”⁸ Not only were university researchers encouraged to work on unclassified projects and publish their results, but they could submit proposals to ONR unsolicited. Also in 1946, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the research organization of the Public Health Service, began offering medical research fellowships and had established an extramural research grants office. Medical research was so popular in the Administration and on Capitol Hill that by 1948, the NIH budget had grown to \$26.5 million, about one-third of which supported extramural grants.⁹

With the launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957, American political leaders placed a major new emphasis on scientific research and education. Between 1957 and 1968, academic research and development expenditures more than tripled, and higher education enrollment grew from 3 million to 7 million students.¹⁰ A host of new programs of undergraduate and graduate student support, research funding, and facilities construction were initiated over this period. But with those new programs came a more complicated, demanding relationship between higher education and Washington. Higher education associations had an important intermediary role to play.¹¹

AAU was more reluctant than other higher education associations to gear up its efforts in Washington, at least in part because many of the presidents of its member universities already had direct access to federal policymakers.¹²

Even so, AAU established its first Washington, D.C., office in 1962, ushering in the modern era of the association. The office was staffed by just one person, Charles P. McCurdy, Jr., a full-time executive secretary. His role was to watch developments in the capital, rather than to work to influence them actively. He was said to have boasted that during his years in Washington, he had never gone to Capitol Hill on business.¹³ Nevertheless, the opening of this office represented a marked departure from the past. Previously, the association had had no office of its own. Its affairs had been handled by officials of member campuses, who would pass on their duties and materials to the next campus volunteering for the duty.

The year 1969 marked another milestone for AAU when the association formed a Council on Federal Relations. This council was made up of campus administrators—frequently vice presidents of research or deans of graduate education—who were given the task of paying particularly close attention to federal issues. The members of the council would meet periodically in Washington. Charles V. Kidd was appointed executive director of the group. Later when Kidd became executive secretary of AAU in 1971, he combined the two positions, and the following year, hired a professional staff assistant. Creation of the council signified the association's increasing focus on federal matters.

Surviving the 70s.

The prosperous times of the 1960s gave way to a period of inflation, reduced enrollments, and cutbacks in federal support of university research and education programs. At the same time, university administrative costs were rising, prompted by new federal regulations in student aid, affirmative action, and health and safety standards.¹⁴ Research universities, more than other types of higher education institutions, had become heavily dependent on financial support and policy decisions from Washington. It was clear that stronger leadership was needed in Washington to focus on those universities' specific interests in federal support of research and graduate education.

Thus, in 1971, AAU approved a plan to have the association led by a part- or full-time salaried president who would be based in the Washington office and appointed for a five-year term. However, the association did not actually put this plan into effect until a committee, headed by then Harvard University President Derek Bok, strongly recommended in 1976 that AAU move forward with the appointment of a full-time president and "commit itself to a comprehensive effort in federal relations." The Bok committee report said this federal relations effort should be "primarily directed toward issues related to the special interests of leading research universities—ie., federally funded research, graduate education . . . , international programs, and research libraries." And the report suggested that additional staff members might be needed to accomplish this task.¹⁵

In 1977, Thomas Bartlett, the former president of Colgate University, became AAU's first president. By the fall of 1978, AAU had in place an executive director for federal relations, and professional staff focusing on federal funding and policy issues surrounding research in the sciences and engineering, biomedical research, graduate education, and the humanities. After some fits and starts, the association had become an activist organization in Washington.

As the AAU activities of the presidents and chancellors expanded, so did the activities of their spouses. In 1977, the presidential spouses created AAU Partners, a vehicle both for organizing a spouses' program during the AAU meetings, and for providing a means to share experiences and strategies for addressing their unique positions on-campus. Through AAU Partners, the spouses over the years have held seminars and discussions on issues related to the role of the presidential spouse, and have arranged special cultural and scholarly tours. The group continues to play an active role in the association.

Thomas Bartlett served as president of the association until 1982. After a brief interregnum, Robert Rosenzweig, who had been vice president for public affairs at Stanford University, became AAU's second president and served for 10 years, until 1993.

By 1983, the AAU agenda in Washington had grown to include far more than the federal funding of university research and graduate education. It included participation in a foreign languages and area studies project, a study of university research instrumentation, operation of a clearinghouse that documented and disseminated information about corporate-university research partnerships, and a data collection project on graduate education. AAU also focused attention on important related issues such as student financial aid, federal support of the humanities, tax policy, and even intercollegiate athletics.

Economic Competitiveness in the 1980s Accentuates Perennial Issues

As a result of biomedical research discoveries that shortened the distance between basic research and product development, coupled with concerns that the Japanese were outdistancing the U.S. in getting new products to market, “economic competitiveness” became the buzzword of the 1980s. Universities were central players. But the growing relationships between industry and universities—strongly encouraged by federal policies such as the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act on technology transfer—raised new issues and revived old ones. AAU found itself at the center of three key issues: misconduct in research, the indirect costs of research, and academic earmarking. These issues continued to occupy the association and its member institutions into the 1990s.

Addressing Concerns about Misconduct in Research

In response to concerns about the potential for research fraud, AAU in the late 1980s, in collaboration with other associations, developed and distributed a set of guidelines for campus policies and procedures for dealing with misconduct in research. When the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) began developing policies for regulating conflict of interest among their grant recipients, AAU in May 1993 stepped in to publish a framework to help universities set up systems to meet the new requirements.

The Growth of Academic Earmarking

As universities began promoting their role in technology transfer and regional economic development, some institutions saw the opportunity to use that role in obtaining federal funding through earmarks. Influential members of Congress were happy to oblige their universities with funding for specific research projects and buildings at least in part to bolster the local economy and with the hope of sparking the next Silicon Valley or Route 128. Thus, the 1980s saw an explosion of academic earmarking.

Over the decade, no issue divided the AAU membership so strongly.¹⁶ At AAU's October 1983 meeting, the presidents and chancellors discussed at length and approved a resolution

supporting peer review as the best means of ensuring scientific quality and calling on members of Congress and university presidents to refrain from seeking earmarks. Two presidents voted against the resolution and several abstained. Four years later, the consensus against earmarking had slipped considerably: in adopting a similar statement against earmarking in 1987, 10 members voted against the measure and two abstained.

With some member institutions arguing that they had no choice but to earmark since there was no longer a federal research facilities program, AAU initiated an effort to create a new research facilities program in the National Science Foundation. But the final product was disappointing: it authorized just \$85 million spread so thinly over a variety of higher education institutions, museums, and research institutes that it had little impact on the facilities problem.

The practice of earmarking funds for university research and facilities abated for a time in the mid-1990s. But it has since begun to grow again. In light of this, AAU at times has been criticized for not enforcing the statement against its members and for not rescinding the statement if it could not be enforced. Yet as a voluntary membership association, AAU can frame policy positions that reflect prevailing views of the membership, but it does not compel adherence to those positions.

The Unsolvable Matter of Research Indirect Costs

Another major issue occupying the association in the 1980s and beyond has been the federal government's reimbursement of the facilities and administrative costs of research, or "indirect costs." Federal indirect cost policies had been of concern to AAU institutions since the federal government began funding university research significantly in the late 1930s. But by the 1980s, when universities were conducting billions of dollars of federal research annually, cutting indirect costs came to be viewed by many within the government as an easy way to reduce federal research costs by forcing universities to pick up the difference between actual and reimbursed costs.

After fighting numerous battles with the administration and Congress over indirect cost issues, AAU in 1987 convened a committee to examine proposals for reform of the indirect cost system. It was thought that by making the system clearer and easier to understand, it would also be more stable and easier to support. Called the "Pings Committee," (after its chairman Cornelius Pings, who was then provost of the University of Southern California but would become AAU president in 1993), the group developed what was viewed as a sensible plan in which universities would accept a fixed allowance for administrative costs in exchange for reducing the frequency and detail of rate negotiations. Documented facilities and instrumentation costs would be allowed to rise. Although these recommendations influenced development of a new set of proposals by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in 1992, those proposals were not implemented. With a presidential election and new leadership at OMB, the old proposals were set aside and new studies and negotiations were initiated.¹⁷

Even as negotiations on indirect cost policies with the administration were taking place, the issue was receiving damaging attention on Capitol Hill. In highly publicized hearings, Rep. John

Dingell (D-MI) denounced universities for overcharging the government with questionable and inappropriate costs. Although many of the alleged overcharges were later proved to be reflections of legitimate differences of opinion over cost allocations, the harm was done. Despite efforts by AAU and others to defend universities' integrity, the issue continues to color the public's view of research universities. Moreover, the complicated system of indirect cost reimbursement remains difficult for many policymakers to understand.

The Issues Intensify in the 1990s

Controversies over federal funding of university research lasted through the 1990s. Early on, the focus was on reducing federal spending—including funding for federal research and higher education—as a means of cutting the federal budget deficit. Within that context, the issue of academic earmarking, and controversies about research conduct and conflict of interest became even more heated.

As the issues intensified, more and more AAU universities found the need to expand their federal relations staffs. This proliferation of new voices for research universities in the capital led to an expanded role for AAU in organizing discussions of the issues and in coordinating strategies for action. At the same time, the higher education associations, scientific and engineering societies, and the universities created new mechanisms for working across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. AAU both led and participated in these groups, including the Coalition for National Science Funding, which focuses on funding for the National Science Foundation, and the Science Coalition, which uses a public relations approach to encourage greater funding of university research by the federal government.

Collaboration already had proved valuable for the association in dealing with issues of concern to the broad higher education community. Since the 1960s, for example, leaders of the six presidentially based higher education associations, as well as their federal relations officers, had been meeting regularly to discuss such issues as student aid regulations, institutional accreditation, and federal tax policies. These and other formal and informal meetings continue today. Along with AAU, the six presidentially based associations include the American Council on Education (ACE), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC).

In the 1990s, AAU also took up an important role in gathering and disseminating information about federal research and education activities. Along with its printed newsletters and updates, AAU developed sophisticated electronic information networks. These networks came to include not only the AAU presidents and chancellors and members of the Council on Federal Relations, but also the campus public affairs officers and outside organizations. AAU was one of the first higher education associations to use its World Wide Web site to provide the latest updates on federal authorization and appropriations actions.

During the tumultuous period of the 1990s, AAU was served by three presidents. Robert Rosenzweig served until 1993, when he was succeeded by Cornelius J. Pings. Pings led the

association for five years until 1998, when he was succeeded by Nils Hasselmo, the former president of the University of Minnesota.

The Continued Importance of Issues of Quality and Effective Management

Even with the association's strong focus on federal policies in research and education, AAU and its member institutions remain concerned about the quality and effective management of research and graduate and undergraduate education programs. The association continues to study and recommend reforms in these areas.

Examples of internal policy initiatives undertaken by AAU in recent years include two reports aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of doctoral programs, a major study of postdoctoral education, a framework for the development of intellectual property policies at AAU institutions, guidelines for human subjects protections, and principles for effective teacher education.

Into the 21st Century

Today, the AAU staff has grown to more than 20. The Council on Federal Relations has changed from a group of largely graduate research deans to a cadre of full-time federal relations professionals with whom AAU staff meets regularly and works with closely to advance the members' federal relations agenda. Other AAU constituent groups that work together and advise the AAU leadership are: the Association of Graduate Schools in the AAU (AGS), the Chief Academic Officers (CAO), the Public Affairs Network (PAN), which consists of the public affairs directors of AAU member universities, and most recently, the AAU Data Exchange (AAUDE), comprising institutional research officers of about three-quarters of AAU member universities.

AAU presidents and chancellors today focus their policy activities in the association through a variety of committees and task forces. These include the committees on costs of research, accreditation and ratings, intellectual property management, diversity, taxes, tenure, and undergraduate education. Special task forces of presidents, chancellors, and other experts currently are addressing such issues as research accountability and the financing of academic health centers.

The Many Societal Contributions of AAU Member Institutions

Although the 61 AAU members are a tiny fraction of the approximately 3,500 higher education institutions in the nation today, AAU member institutions have come to play a major role in the prosperity, health and well being of the nation.

Overall, AAU's member institutions account for about 50 percent of the doctoral degrees awarded in the United States each year, along with 22 percent of the master's degrees and 16 percent of the bachelor's degrees. These institutions also account for about 55 percent of the

total research and development performed by all American colleges and universities each year, and they receive 58 percent of the federal funds for academic R&D.

Among their many research contributions, AAU institutions have: developed the recombinant DNA technique that created the biotechnology industry, pioneered development of the Internet, laid the groundwork for space exploration by developing the fundamental principles and technology of rocketry, revolutionized agriculture with vaccines and treatments that have eliminated or controlled hundreds of plant and livestock diseases, and developed vaccines and antibiotics that have improved the health of millions of people.

At the same time, AAU member universities make major contributions to the communities and states in which they are located, through extension programs and community service activities, by providing cutting-edge medical care, and by enriching the cultural and economic life of the areas they serve.

One hundred years ago in that small meeting at the University of Chicago, the founders of AAU could not have imagined the breadth and accomplishments of America's research universities at the dawn of the 21st century. But they would be proud of those achievements and of the role of AAU in helping set the institutional standards that fostered them.

Founding Members of AAU

The Catholic University of America
Clark University
Columbia University
Cornell University
Harvard University, first president of AAU
The Johns Hopkins University
Princeton University
Stanford University
University of California, Berkeley
University of Chicago
University of Michigan
University of Pennsylvania
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Yale University

¹ Slate, Audrey N., *AGS: A History*, Austin, Texas, The Association of Graduate Schools in the Association of American Universities, 1994, p. 3-6. **Five university presidents and nine deans or other campus administrators attended the first meeting at the University of Chicago. Catholic University was represented, although it mistakenly had been left out of the original letter. Cornell, Wisconsin, and Yale were not represented at the first meeting, but were represented thereafter.**

² Geiger, Roger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900-1940*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 19.

³ Slate, Audrey N., *AGS: A History*, p. 52-57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶ Hawkins, Hugh, *Banding Together: The Rise of National Associations in American Higher Education, 1887-1950*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 206.

⁷ Bush, Vannevar, *Science—The Endless Frontier*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945.

⁸ Geiger, Roger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰ Rosenzweig, Robert M., *The Political University: Policy, Politics, and Presidential Leadership in the American Research University*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p.7.

¹¹ Boland, Harland G., *Associations in Action: The Washington, D.C. Higher Education Community*, Washington, D.C., ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 2, 1985, p. xix.

¹² Ibid, p. 22

¹³ Rosenzweig, *The Political University*, p.20.

¹⁴ Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge*, p. 85.

¹⁵ Association of American Universities, *Draft Report on the Future of AAU*, Washington, D.C., April, 1976.

¹⁶ Rosenzweig, *The Political University*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 76.