



NEWSMAKER INTERVIEW: HUNTER RAWLINGS III

On Teaching, Tuition, and Talent

U.S. research universities are being asked to improve instruction, hold down costs, and promote economic growth. Are they up to the challenge?

The Association of American Universities (AAU), a group of 61 elite public and private institutions, has traditionally focused on national policies relating to higher education. But under its new president, Hunter Rawlings III, it's also begun to look more closely at what's happening on the campuses of its members. A new initiative aimed at improving the teaching of undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), Rawlings says, represents an issue that is vital to both the nation and the AAU membership.

"We have not been doing a great job of teaching science and engineering, especially to freshmen and sophomores," says Rawlings, a classics professor who took up the reins of AAU last summer and whose resumé includes stints as president of the University of Iowa and Cornell University. "So over a 5-year period, we are going to try and make a difference by disseminating to our members the results of the latest research on teaching and, frankly, advocating for them."

In an interview with *Science* at AAU's Washington, D.C., headquarters, Rawlings predicted that raising the quality of undergraduate instruction will rank high on the to-do list in an upcoming National Academies report on the health of research universities. He also offered some strong opinions on what those institutions need to do to retain their global leadership despite the current stringent fiscal climate. Following is an edited version of that conversation.

—JEFFREY MERVIS

Q: Do you see any likelihood that the steady rise in tuition will slow down?

H.R.: I very much sympathize with universities whose basic instructional budgets are being whacked by 10% or 15% a year by state legislatures. But we need to do a better job of controlling costs. The recession and loss of endowment money has forced a lot of universities to cut costs. But still, tuition is going up, along with room and board and fees. The public and the president are saying they've had enough. The outside pressure is growing to bring it to a halt. I think it's going to slow way down.

Q: The National Institutes of Health is concerned about the aging of its grantees. Is AAU doing anything to address the issue

of older faculty members who don't want to retire?

H.R.: I think it's irresponsible when faculty members stay on in their positions because the law allows them to. At a time when jobs are scarce, I think it's your responsibility to retire and allow the next generation to step forward into academic positions. . . . Some departments do a great job of creating the expectation that you're going to retire at age, say, 67, or whatever it happens to be. And the peers make that work. They make it impossible for someone to stay past that point because it's regarded as inappropriate.

Q: There's talk that cuts in state support are turning flagship state universities into quasi-private institutions. What's your view?

H.R.: Well, they aren't going private. They're owned by their states. They'll always be owned by their states. So I think it's bad talk to suggest otherwise.

But it's certainly true that the share of their budgets coming from their states is getting smaller. And that's a shame, because it leads to the perception that education is no longer a public good, which was the understanding we've always had. It's become a private interest, and an economic one at that. And that's not so great. But right now state budgets are also stressed because of the bad economy and the need to spend more on prisons, on K–12 education, on Medicaid, and so on. . . .

Fortunately, research universities are remarkably resilient. They have other ways of raising funds. Prisons don't have a whole lot of donors interested in naming cells. But universities have been very successful in raising money, as well as winning grants for research and having industry to invest. So they are doing their best to cope.

Q: Many universities tout their ability to help stimulate their region's economy. What do junior faculty members need to know about technology transfer, and is there a risk that schools will overpromise?

H.R.: Not to be flippant, but I think it's absolutely fine for a young professor in my field, Greek and Latin, to know absolutely nothing [about commercializing their research]. After all, this is only a portion of what goes on at a research university. But seriously, I think a young researcher in a STEM field has a responsibility, if her work has some possible applications, to be open to someone from the university coming to her and saying, "We think your work has some economic potential. And we'll help you with that."

Q: Are universities doing enough to help graduate students and postdocs who can't find academic jobs?

H.R.: I think we need to do a much better job of making opportunities outside academia accessible to postdocs. We've been focused on cloning ourselves. But nobody is saying, "There are lots of jobs out there for which you are supremely qualified, and we're going to help you."

That being said, you can't plan centrally and federally to produce Ph.D.s at a particular rate and in a particular field. You do your best to shape things in a helpful way, but you're never going to come out evenly, as it were. We need to get smarter at it, but we're never going to solve the problem.