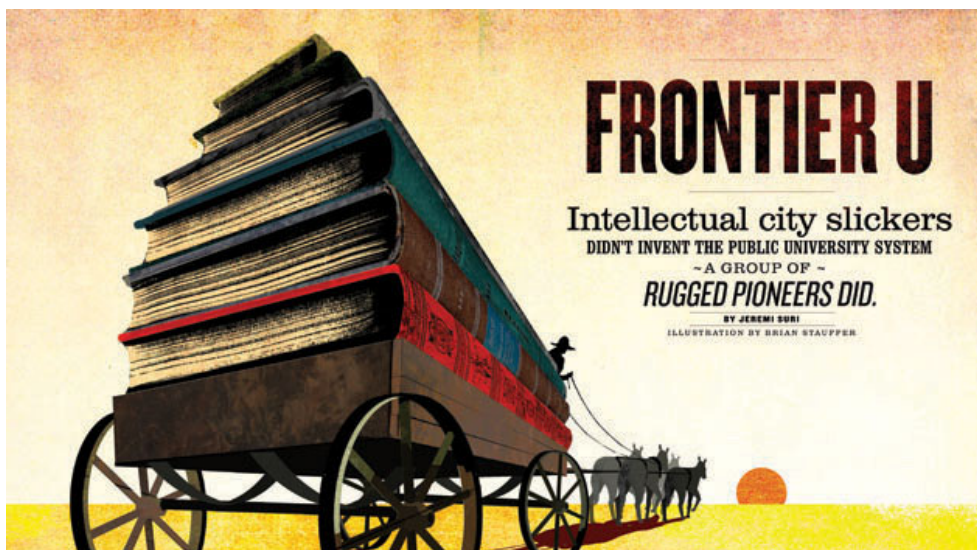




Frontier U

BY [JEREMI SURI](#) IN [FEATURES](#), [JAN | FEB 2013](#) ON JANUARY 2, 2013 AT 5:39 PM



In 1958, during the height of the Cold War, University of Texas Provost Harry Ransom wrote of a “counterfrontier” that challenged the stereotypical image of the state as a place of cowboys, ranchers, hunters, and hard drinkers.

Ransom pointed to an often-overlooked tradition of hard work, local cooperation, and self-improvement that allowed Texans, and thousands of other Americans, to turn frontier settlements into sites of prosperity and progress. “What concerned these people,” Ransom wrote, “was the significance of human life, the dignity of the human being, the rights of the individual man.” Texans of the “counterfrontier,” according to Ransom, believed in higher education and its potential for the public good.

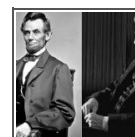
Of course, Ransom was not writing of his home state alone. The most striking characteristic of American settlers was their commitment to higher education. Everywhere they went, frontiersmen forced American Indians off the land, built homesteads, and opened universities. Violence, profit, and education went hand-in-hand. Many settlers brought slaves, but they also carried a commitment to personal freedom, at least for white men. They planted farms, opened businesses, and established local governments. Settlement meant both destroying an old world and building anew.

Despite Hollywood depictions to the contrary, the frontier created an intellectual as well as a physical test of humanity. You had to be smart to survive on the frontier. You needed sites of advanced learning to assist the constant adjustments that were required in an unfriendly and ever-changing landscape. The unforgiving terrain left little solace for empty ideology.



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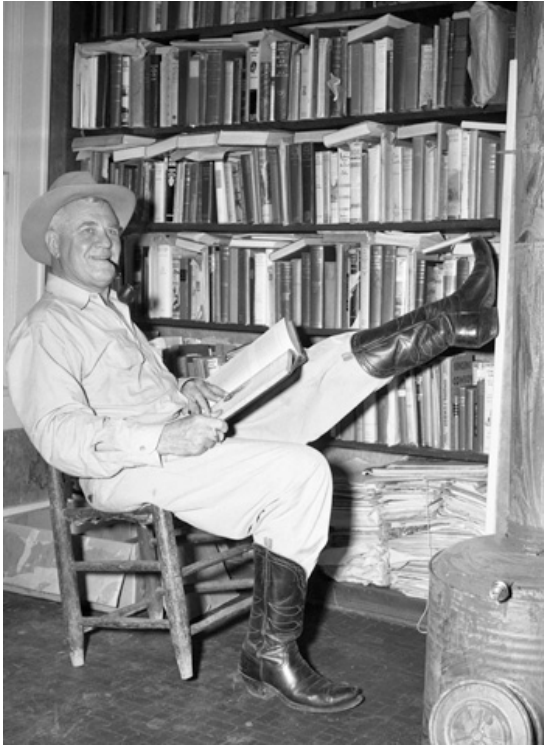
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explained in great depth how westward settlers radically challenged conventional ideas about authority, religion, and family. The frontier was the heartland for wildcat gold and oil exploration, as well as Mormonism and feminism. More new churches opened and more women voted in the 19th-century West than in the more tradition-bound Northeast.

The second president of the young and troubled Texas Republic, Mirabeau Lamar, captured this culture of innovation when he offered what remains the most eloquent defense of higher education. Above all, Lamar emphasized the need to convert the pioneering energies that rapidly filled the West to the sustainable qualities of growth, governance, and “civilization.” In December 1838, he proposed the creation of “a University where the highest branches of science may be taught.” Lamar explained the importance of advanced education to men and women of the frontier: “It is admitted

by all, that a cultivated mind is the guardian of Democracy, and while guided and controlled by virtue, the noblest attribute of man. It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge, and the only security which freemen desire. The influence of Education in the moral world, is like light in the physical; rendering luminous, what before was obscure.”

Lamar observed that the Republic of Texas had been “formed by a Spartan Spirit,” but he advised that it could only endure if it built institutions that allowed it to “progress and ripen into Roman firmness, and Athenian gracefulness and wisdom.” For Lamar and many of his counterparts, science and humanism had to accompany profit and militarism. Universities offered a space—perhaps the only space—where these qualities could be balanced and passed from one generation to another.

This was a truly ambitious and enlightened vision, shared in almost every new territory. As each frontier state came into the Union, it built a university on Lamar’s model. Men and women who settled in such distant and forbidding territories recognized that they could not allow ignorance and complacency to creep into their lives. Settlers were not intellectuals in any sense of the word, but they were pragmatists who recognized that they had to make themselves stronger and smarter; otherwise they could not prosper. They had to learn new things; otherwise they could not keep up. The words “improvement” and “progress” pervade the words of Lamar and his contemporaries in Kansas, Wisconsin, Michigan, Oregon, and California. It was the rugged American frontier, not the cosmopolitan cities, that made the public university as we know it.

In its origins and its purposes, the American public university is unique. It remains crucial for understanding the growth of American society to the present day.

The state of Georgia planted the first seeds in 1785 when it allocated 40,000 acres of land to create a public institution of higher education. The sale of the land provided an endowment, and the university used the income from that endowment to pay faculty salaries and finance basic operations. Following Lamar’s proposal to the Texas Congress in December 1838, the Republic allocated more than 220,000 acres of land for the similar endowment of two universities, one of which would be located in the new capital city of Austin.

These state allocations of land gained nationwide momentum when in 1862, amid the violence of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, providing 30,000 acres to every state in the Union for a public university. When the states of the former Confederacy rejoined the Union after

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the war, they also received the same land endowment for higher education. A second Morrill Act passed Congress in 1890, funding public colleges and universities, largely for African Americans in the South.

The language of the 1862 Morrill Act echoed that of Mirabeau Lamar and anticipated Harry Ransom. It called upon universities to help farmers and shopkeepers become prosperous democratic citizens. It also looked to universities as centers that would provide men and women with the science and industry to improve their lives. Teaching, research, and a democratic commitment to ordinary citizens constituted the public-university vision. No other society had ever passed similar legislation on such a large scale.

“Without excluding other scientific and classical studies,” public universities had a statutory mission, according to the Morrill Act, “to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”

The public university was universal in its ambition to push new frontiers, and it was public in its aspiration to reach as many citizens as possible. Writing from one of the country’s earliest public universities, the University of Wisconsin, historian Frederick Jackson Turner saw the openness and achievement of the frontier mirrored in the “pioneer” institution where he taught at the end of the 19th century. He predicted that universities would “safeguard democracy” amid constant social and economic change.

As the nation ran out of new frontier land, Turner was confident that the public university would offer a continued laboratory for cultivating the same virtues. In Madison, Ann Arbor, Berkeley, and Austin, the frontier would never end. The public university promoted infinite horizons for countless citizens. Instead of the high walls and gothic architecture of private colleges, public universities designed campuses that were open, green, and filled with spaces for free movement. The buildings were distinguished in appearance, but they were constructed to inspire and attract, not intimidate or separate. The public university campus created a new settlement community on the land. It was a re-enactment of the frontier.



Harry Ransom had read Turner, and he had observed The University of Texas campus with more penetrating insight than any of his contemporaries.

Ransom understood the role that the university played as a contributor to the public culture of the state. He also saw it as the repository for the wisdom and virtue that citizens had acquired across generations of experience, often on the former frontier.

Through courses, public lectures, and published writings, the university promoted wisdom and virtue, and their continuous adjustment to the needs of the time. For Ransom, the campus was not just a recreated frontier, but also a seedbed for sprouting innovation rooted in well-seasoned soils. Students would become active citizens as they learned to appreciate the history of their unique democracy and its ever-evolving dimensions. The public university was the bridge between the early and the modern republic, as well as the frontier and the Cold War.

In the 1950s, Ransom recognized how difficult it was to maintain this bridge. The United States faced enormous pressures to expand its military and economic efforts overseas, it struggled to serve the growing consumer demands of a large urban population, and it intensely debated the appropriate restrictions on personal freedom for the sake of protecting national security. Ransom was one of many leaders in American society to see investments in the public university as the appropriate

mechanism for addressing these dilemmas. He articulated what he called “the conscience of the university”: “It says that patient understanding rather than violence leads to workable solutions between two persons or among 200 million.” New research would provide the technologies and strategies necessary for security and prosperity; expanded teaching opportunities would transmit the skills and insights necessary for freedom and democracy.

Cold War presidents from Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower to Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan recognized that public universities could defeat poverty and communism by promoting the best of the frontier. They put money behind this vision. Beginning with the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, and continuing through the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and Lyndon Johnson’s many “Great Society” programs in the 1960s, federal and state governments invested unprecedented capital in expanding public universities beyond even the imagination of Lamar. Enrollments more than doubled, research spending grew by a factor of 10 (often more), and campuses became incubators for technologies, businesses, and cultural creations that redefined lives far from university grounds. Nuclear energy, Google, and the contemporary music scene are outgrowths of university research sponsored by the federal government and the states. The highly skilled innovators, managers, and employees who run these enterprises are the former students funded by government agencies.

Public universities kept the American frontier alive in the second half of the 20th century. Middle-class citizens and immigrants from all regions of the world began their socioeconomic rise on these campuses. Creative business, defense, and health ventures—from the atomic bomb to modern vaccines—grew out of scholarly research. Public universities also served as incubators for our popular literature, art, and entertainment. Where else can one visit talented students, world-class libraries, and the most advanced laboratories while also attending some of the best football played on a sunny Saturday afternoon? Where else can one bring together so many creative, hardworking, optimistic people for the purpose of building a better world?



It is no wonder that every country is trying to copy our public universities. Foreign leaders are indeed looking most closely at the public, not the private, universities. Foreign leaders want world-class institutions that are publicly funded and devoted to the public good. They want to create their own frontiers.

This is where foreign leaders are most likely to fail. Without frontier experience, it is very difficult to build frontier institutions. Without a history of pioneering, creative, and free experimentation, it is very hard to nurture a culture friendly to these qualities. This is especially true in societies, like China and Russia, that are not politically free. The American public university is a truly unique phenomenon that others can copy but probably not recreate. It is in our soil and our memory. It is our history.

What does this mean for our contemporary policy choices? It means a lot. We need to appreciate how

our public universities emerged during the last two centuries in order to understand what we must do to promote them today. Each campus needs to renew its commitment to the public, and the public must renew its commitment to each campus. That means much more than cheering at football games and sending annual contributions, as important as those contributions are. Public engagement requires a serious discussion, with multiple stakeholders, about how we can improve ourselves as a society, and how public universities can help. What do we really care about? What kind of world do we want to create? How will we build bridges between our material needs and our moral commitments? Frontier settlers like Lamar had the courage to open these discussions. We must find the same political resolve today.

We spend so much time talking about money that we often forget why we need it. The United States is a modern world power that still lives on the pioneering spirit of its frontier origins. Public universities are the unique places that make this possible. Internal bureaucracies, perverse professional incentives, and complaisance often undermine this mission. So do politicized attacks, misplaced funding priorities, and ignorance among our political leaders. The challenges to the greatness of our universities are internal and external, reaching a perfect storm since the recession of 2008.

Mirabeau Lamar and Harry Ransom lived in times when citizens had far less, but they also recognized that our society and its universities could do much more. This history should help us resurrect the passion, the will, and the self-sacrifice of our predecessors. We can do better if we make the necessary leap of imagination to place ourselves again on the frontier—a 21st-century frontier of knowledge, innovation, and public improvement.

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Illustration by Brian Stauffer. Photos from top: J. Frank Dobie in 1943 (Austin History Center/Austin Public Library); Harry Ransom (courtesy the Ransom Center); In front of the Women’s Building on The University of Texas grounds, ca. 1903 (Austin History Center/Austin Public Library).

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