As AASCU celebrates its 50th anniversary, The Innovative University (2011)—by Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring—may be the perfect anniversary gift. It's yet another book in a long line of recent publications that address the contemporary crisis in American higher education. But this one is different in several important ways. It looks backwards as it traces the development of the processes and practices now found widely in higher education in the United States (the so-called DNA of colleges and universities). It also urges us to think about our current practice. The Innovative University compares two dramatically different 21st century universities, Harvard University and Brigham Young University–Idaho (BYU Idaho), a stark comparison that highlights the dramatic differences between these two institutions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the book looks forward as it offers a number of specific solutions for institutions that want to re-imagine themselves.

The story begins with a detailed analysis of the accumulation of practices that have combined to create the typical American university: face-to-face instruction, faculty self-governance, departmentalization, long summer recess, private fundraising, competitive athletics, general education, majors, externally-funded research, up-or-out tenure and others. The authors trace many of those practices first adopted by Harvard and then—in an ever-widening circle—by the vast majority of all traditional American public and private universities in America. The collective DNA created through this process resulted, for Harvard, in the decision "to serve fewer of the country's undergraduate students, to make the curriculum expansive in the aggregate but narrower and more arcane at the level of individual courses, and to focus more faculty attention on research scholarship" (p. 134). Christensen and Eyring conclude that the unconsidered adoption of this kind of collection of practices creates universities that are essentially unsustainable, trying to do all things for all people and inevitably failing. In fact, the authors argue that even Harvard, with what was once a $36 billion endowment, could not sustain the contradictions and broad set of missions. Harvard has had to make strategic choices. Christensen and Eyring argue that all American universities are going to have to make strategic choices and sharply limit the breadth of their mission if they are to not only be successful but indeed simply endure. Christensen knows the vulnerability created by new technology and old habits, having studied disruption across a series of industries (The Innovator’s Dilemma; Disrupting Class). He argues that the high cost of an undergraduate degree, prompted by the failure of institutions to focus on a limited role, has created conditions in higher education that are ripe for disruption.

Woven into the first part of the book, however, in addition to tracing the creation of Harvard's DNA, is the story of the creation and growth of a far different institution, Ricks Academy. Originally a K-12 school founded by Mormon pioneers, Ricks Academy grew into a normal school and then a two-year college in rural Idaho (now Brigham Young University-Idaho). Despite being far removed from the east coast, Ricks was influenced in its development by some of Harvard's practices and some leaders with Harvard connections. Yet the analysis of Ricks/BYU-Idaho reveals a DNA that, while influenced by Harvard, turned out to be quite different. Growing up like so many other institutions in the 20th century, at first it seemed to follow a predictable trajectory: academy for K-12, normal school, two-year college, four-year college. But in the 1950s, the school, under church leadership, took a dramatic turn and moved back to two-year status. Then in 2000, again at
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By each institution, in the special context of its own history and place. But the real leadership challenge is how to enact such changes to narrow the scope of activities, with the inevitable reductions in programs and people, in the context of rigid state policy, unforgiving alumni pressure, governing board reluctance and fierce faculty and staff resistance. As we think about AASCU’s 50th anniversary, and the proud legacy that our member institutions have created in the past, we also look to the future, and the book that is yet to be written. How do AASCU institutions respond to the imperatives of a new age? What is the specific mix of programs and practices that reflect the needs of this new era? This next chapter is undoubtedly already being written by a group of AASCU presidents and their institutions as they work to forge new institutions for the 21st century.

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