



The Stanford Renaissance: A final look at the Casper years

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A university education does not lend itself to students having a sense of their university's past. The student body remains perpetually young, and its collective memory hardly stretches back four years.

You come to a school to learn from it, end up spending a few years finding your way through it, and if by accident or catastrophe you somehow manage to catch a glimpse of the way it was before you, that glimpse probably arrives more or less as you pack your bags to leave.

This is especially the case if you arrived at Stanford in the final years of University President Gerhard Casper's tenure. The late '90s were calm except for the occasional rain storm, prosperous except for a single unfortunate hospital merger, upbeat and cheery unless you were a homeless graduate student - and it was only a matter of time before that problem was remedied as well. Now and then you heard the cloudy term "indirect cost," usually followed by the word "controversy," but you shrugged off both with a smile and returned to playing Frisbee. It seemed that things had always been this way on the Farm and always would be, only better.

The Unbearable Lightness of Graduation

The point is not that most students are unaware that Tressider and Wilbur were once presidents, just like Casper, or that Stanford was a fairly unremarkable undergraduate college before World War II, little recognized outside California or even that late in the '80s Stanford was number one in the U.S. News & World Report college rankings that it now so vocally ignores: the point is that it is difficult for a student to realize how much difference eight years, like the eight years of Casper's presidency, can make to their undergraduate experiences.

Set aside AXESS, which did not debut until 1992, and before which people registered for classes by waiting in notoriously long lines at the Registrar's office. Set aside the Stanford-in-Moscow campus, launched in 1993. Set aside the renovated Bing Wing and the Cantor Arts Center and the Science & Engineering Quad, which you probably still think of as new, though of course in the eyes of next year's freshmen it will seem as established and unsurprising as the Main Quad, just as the red-bow-tied Vice Provost for Student Affairs James Montoya seems a campus fixture to you, even though he only started his job in Casper's first year.

Instead, think of Stanford Introductory Seminars, the small, tightly-knit classes for freshman or sophomores taught by the sort of renowned professors that would regularly be found behind podiums, lecturing to graduate students. Think of Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom delivering commissioned lectures as part of an ongoing symposium on the future of the humanities - and participating in sit-down discussions afterwards. Think of Sophomore College, arriving early at Stanford, late in the summer, and joining in the kind of daily, intensive studies and discussions with professors that most people associate with small, liberal arts colleges like Amherst rather than major research universities. (A few of you: think of the President's Scholars program and feel very, very grateful for thousands of research dollars before your junior year. The rest of you: hate them.) You would have experienced none of these programs, the academic high points in many students' Stanford careers, had you graduated in or before 1992.

In the early '90s, Stanford simply had more important things to worry about than drastically overhauling undergraduate education. Another kind of overhaul was already being forced upon the University's students and faculty. Rather than trying to advance the undergraduate program, the University struggled to protect it as much as possible from a \$40 million budget cutback necessitated in part by reduced research funding from the federal government. Despite the fiscal upheaval, University President Donald Kennedy began initiating programs to improve undergraduate education at the end of his tenure. At the time, media coverage had begun to draw attention to the widespread impression among educators and the public at large that undergraduate education nation-wide was suffering due to an overemphasis on faculty research. In 1991, the indirect cost controversy still in full swing, Kennedy set aside \$7 million for undergraduate teaching initiatives, such as financial rewards for outstanding teachers.

Casper said in a recent interview with *The Weekly* that his concern for undergraduate education grew out of his university experience at Hamburg, where he received a law degree in 1961. Enrolled in a packed course in which the lecturer literally lectured, in the Latin sense, solely reading from a prepared manuscript, Casper was so dissatisfied that he considered dropping out. It was not what he felt an education should be. "I've always said that negative role models can be just as important as positive ones," Casper said.

Thankfully, he gave the university another chance and found an advanced-degree seminar that involved discussion and close contact with the professor, exactly the sort of course he has promoted at Stanford. Apparently the experience renewed his faith in university education, as he went on to acquire a master of laws degree from Yale ('62), a doctorate from the University of Freiburg ('64) and teaching positions at UC-Berkeley, the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium and the University of Chicago before arriving on the Farm in 1992. His Commission on Undergraduate Education, the findings of which led to many of his undergraduate innovations at Stanford, arrived in 1995.

Looking to the future, Provost John Hennessy has expressed interest in expanding Casper's innovations to the second two undergraduate years. It seems that with any luck things will only get better.

Then and now

Few people would have predicted the rosy end-of-the-century glow at Stanford when Casper took office in 1992. It is difficult to reconcile the tone and atmosphere of the University then and now, only eight years later. Imagine opening *The Daily* to find news of cutbacks, cost battles and disgruntled students rather than expansion, start ups and heated ASSU elections. Imagine Casper stepping down in the hopes of ending "confusion and doubt inside the Stanford family," as Kennedy wrote in his July 1991 letter of resignation. Imagine *The Daily* writing in the announcement of Hennessy's selection, "Higher education is struggling fiscally, losing federal research support and facing a crisis in public trust," as it did when Casper was selected in March 1992.

In one way or another, Stanford's sense of well-being hinges on its finances. There would be no controversies over graduate housing or funding for Chicano Studies if the University had an unlimited bank account, but as Casper has often repeated and the numbers confirm, Stanford's endowment simply is not as large as people think it is: a mere \$6.2 billion as of April, versus, for example, Harvard's \$14.3 billion. As recently as 1997, Stanford's endowment-per-student ranked 17th among American universities.

The University's well-being took two sharp dives before its 1991 centennial, first from the \$160 million of damage caused by the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and second from the indirect cost controversy, which erupted shortly before autumn quarter 1990. Stanford became a scapegoat for the national media, and Kennedy was grilled by a congressional committee over confusion in the federal government's system of reimbursing overhead ("indirect") costs for basic science research at universities.

The Stanford yacht *Victoria*, whose depreciation had been charged to the federal government as overhead, became an icon for pundits and political cartoonists nation-wide. In the wake of the controversy, Stanford's rate of reimbursement was drastically reduced - no small matter for a university that first rose to national prominence as a result of Cold War research funding and relies to this day on federal support for over a third of its operating budget. Despite a more than successful \$1.1 billion centennial fundraising campaign, the largest ever attempted by a university at the time, Stanford found itself faced with a \$40 million deficit in its operating budget, and the future of its finances looked even more bleak.

To balance the operating budget, the administration ordered a 10 percent reduction in the University's operating costs, and the Board of Trustees called for a 9.5 percent raise in undergraduate tuition. The 1992-93 year brought the smallest faculty pay increase in 20 years, only 2 percent. Applications began to drop while rising at other universities. Even those accepted to Stanford seemed wary: by 1993, eight out of 10 applicants accepted to both Stanford and Harvard chose the Crimson over the Cardinal. An overseas campus in Salamanca, Spain was dismantled. Some enrolled students feared that their majors might not be around when they graduated.

In 1992, people expected Stanford to emerge from its cutbacks leaner,

calmer, tougher and probably in some sense better, but few if any anticipated a truly stronger, larger, more ambitious and robust university. Yet that is exactly what Stanford is today.

The University spent nearly \$1 billion restoring and constructing new facilities during the '90s and plans to build more than twice as much in the next decade, more development than in any decade of its history. Casper has raised donations to \$300 million annually. The number of freshman applications and the yield rate of accepted students who choose Stanford have hit all-time highs. The University is a five-time Sears Cup champion and can probably expect to continue its streak until the cup changes criteria for judging.

Even minority faculty and affirmative action controversies seem for the most part to have fizzled in the breezy contentment of late-'90s Stanford. Casper made every effort to ensure that Stanford's internal squabbles would no longer provide material for the national media. With a characteristic lack of fanfare, Stanford's indirect cost controversy dissolved itself. It is widely acknowledged now that Stanford's accounting practices at the time were not substantially different from other universities'. After the University paid \$3.5 million back to the government, much less than the \$200 million that was originally alleged, the federal Office of Naval Research stated that it had found no evidence of "fraud, misrepresentation or other wrongdoing." Stanford ended up paying far more in legal and accounting fees - nearly \$40 million - than it ever paid in reimbursement.

How did the University lift itself from the dark days of the early '90s to where it is now? The answer lies in a survey of some of the campus' more recent additions: buildings dedicated to Allen, Gates, Hewlett, Packard and Clark. Stanford was built with railroad money and made great with help from federal funds. It is what it is today thanks to investment from the private industries of Silicon Valley.

The turn in Stanford's fortunes was gradual, but a representative moment arrived in 1996, when then Provost Condoleezza Rice announced that an expected \$7 million budgetary cut was being scaled back to \$3.1 million. The massive cuts in science funding promised by the anti-Big Government GOP Congress of 1994 never really materialized, though there was a slight drop. Rice's announcement brought a premature end to a controversial \$20 million round of cuts initiated after the \$40 million cutback was completed in 1992. In 1996, the University found that rather than facing a deficit, it was sporting a \$15 million surplus.

Not only has the University returned to its usual good spirits, but it has come to embody the ethos of a cultural moment, for better or worse. As former Daily reporter Romesh Ratnesar, class of 1995, wrote in a recent Time article on Stanford runaway Tiger Woods, today in America is "an era defined by placid prosperity and cross-cultural, NASDAQ-obsessed Generation Y geeks who went to Stanford."

Sad, but true.

The talented Dr. Casper

One of the greatest ironies of the 1990's Stanford renaissance is that while the University's ambitiously laid-back, ambivalently intelligent style came to dominate the tech-culture landscape, the University itself was led by a man with a decidedly different style: witty, deadpan, intellectual, precise. He says he used to read "War & Peace" every two years or so before the presidency and has been greatly influenced in his life by "Henri Quatre," a novel by Thomas Mann's brother Heinrich. A Stanford magazine article notes that he is prone to quoting Goethe, Montaigne and Henry Adams.

Even his speaking style seems carefully modulated and formed. He says he receives no gratification from the power of the presidency and will not miss being quoted and having his words published. In a letter to Ted Koppel in 1998, Casper described the difficulty of maintaining a sphere of personal privacy as Stanford president: "I was reluctant to answer endless questions about my private life in a culture that has come to equate reticence with standoffishness or worse."

As an organizer and chair of several architectural competitions for new campus buildings, Casper helped insure that Stanford's intense development in the past few years was matched by an equally intense mindfulness of aesthetics. He once lamented the low turnout of Stanford students at the recently re-opened Cantor Center for the Visual Arts, and he noted that architecture is the one form of art that cannot be avoided.

Always reminding students of their ties to the intellectual life of the past, Casper included in his first commencement speech, about a University's "first days," a lengthy, carefully crafted meditation on the Stanford motto, "Die Luft der Freiheit weht" (the wind of freedom blows). It was as if he wrote his addresses as a single work when he rounded off his final speech, at the 2000 convocation, with an invocation of "last days," both for graduates and for his presidency.

Born Christmas day, 1937 in the port city of Hamburg, Germany, Casper was raised in the shadow of World War II. It seems that freedom has played a central role in his outlook ever since - his celebration of the Stanford motto being only one example. A highly regarded constitutional law scholar and emeritus editor of the Supreme Court Review, he is rumored to carry a well-thumbed copy of the U.S. Constitution in his breast pocket and once co-authored a book with eclectic libertarian Richard Posner, the controversial chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals who ruled that nude dancing is a form of expression protected by the First Amendment and who favors the legalization of marijuana.

In an interview with Stanford magazine, Casper singled out a 1995 Santa Clara County Superior Court ruling Stanford's "hate speech" policy unconstitutional as one subject he wishes he'd taken a stronger stand on during his presidency. He said he was ambivalent about the hate speech policy itself, and "would have preferred the harsh wind of freedom." But he rejected the notion that government could take away a university's freedom to regulate its students' speech. In the end he decided not to appeal the ruling, partly to avoid negative press for Stanford.

"Universities have to ask what they want in their presidents," he told The Daily in 1993. "If they want a person who shows up in every corner and gives speeches in every corner, that is one model. But if they want a president who worries about the substance of the academic enterprise then



they have to reduce their demands. The two cannot be reconciled."

Casper has served his eight years as a model of the latter type while never neglecting the personal interaction with students that he has said he enjoys so much in teaching. His bedtime stories, guest spots in Gaieties, tea and cookies gatherings and presence at a basketball game with the Sixth Man Club testify to a continual and largely successful effort to overcome any barriers that might have resulted from his arriving at Stanford as an "outsider."

Shortly after Casper's selection as president, Jean Fetter, the executive vice chair of the search committee, responded to a Daily reporter's question about whether Casper's having come from the "more traditional" University of Chicago might affect Stanford's commitment to diversity. "If Stanford can't cope with someone very different coming in," she said, "it's not living up to its own values."

Casper's "difference," often exaggerated and yet in some sense real, has in countless ways benefited Stanford through a particular diversity that an outside observer might say the University tends to neglect: the diversity of style, of fashion. Thanks to Casper's style, as well as his expert guidance, subtle leadership and stream of innovations, Stanford should be a stronger and more thoughtful institution for years to come.