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## University Presidential Memoirs

By John V. Lombardi July 23, 2007  
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University presidents are a varied lot: some charismatic and charming, some dour and solid, some charlatans and others true believers. Those of us who

have watched, and lived the cycle of presidential performance often wonder if there's a predictable set of characteristics that would define the successful, triumphant institutional leader. We read studies of the university presidency, follow the ups and downs of individual careers, handicap the likely outcome of this or that public presidential controversy, but in the end, we find it difficult to sort out the elements of singular leadership. Of course, many successful presidents imagine that the quality of their achievement came from within themselves, while those whose time in office was painful and unproductive will emphasize the context that prevented success. Truth of course is somewhere in the middle, success coming from a combination of personal characteristics, talents, and skills matched to particular opportunities and limitations of place and time, combinations rarely repeated and difficult to emulate.

In the genre of presidential memoirs, one of the best is by the legendary president of Indiana University, Herman B Wells, whose book *Being Lucky: Reminiscences and Reflections* (1980) provided a sane, fascinating, and realistic appraisal of his long and remarkably successful reign with an admirable recognition of the luck that made success possible. A more recent addition to this literature comes from the pen of James J. Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan. A long-time leader of the Michigan enterprise in many roles ending up as president for most of a decade, Duderstadt offers his perspective in [The View from the Helm: Leading the American University during an Era of Change \(2007\)](#), and produces a fine example of the genre. Reflecting a deep understanding of the challenges and rewards of a lifetime of university engagement, and with the wisdom born of many battles, mostly won, a few lost, the book is required reading for those interested in the career and inner life of major public university presidents.

Duderstadt's approach, surely a reflection of his engineer's background, is thorough, comprehensive, complete, and careful. At times, the effort to fully explain and celebrate the history and accomplishments of the University of Michigan wears a bit, but in the end, the reward is a truly perceptive and candid commentary on the changing nature of the public university and its impact on the presidency. No short commentary can do this book justice, except to recommend it. The analyses of governance issues, of the increasing difficulty of managing politically generated boards, and of the fragmented nature of campus culture are exceptionally useful. Duderstadt works hard to keep his optimism intact and his enthusiasm for the game high, but in the end, this is not an altogether cheerful story.

And we ask ourselves, we who live in similar contexts: If one of the most successful university presidents of our time, who lived and worked in one of America's premier research universities, leaves the helm with concern and misgivings,

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what foolhardy instinct keeps the rest of us at it?

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