Trends in Outreach and Service

Irvin D. Reid
President
Marilyn Williamson
Interim Provost & Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Wayne State University

As universities seek to retain the trust and support of multiple publics (taxpayers, alumni, legislators, donors, and community leaders), they must respond more rapidly than in the past to the complex needs of a volatile society. This kind of response will come from all universities, but it is particularly urgent for urban universities, like Wayne State University, which have long assumed an obligation to serve the metropolitan area that surrounds them. The urgency is increased, moreover, by the condition of many urban school districts, which only exacerbates problems of poverty, poor housing, and racial tension. Recently, for example, at the behest of Michigan Governor John Engler, the City of Detroit assumed responsibility for the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Wayne State University has pledged itself to major assistance to bring about reform in the DPS (P. Walsh-Sarnecki 1999).

Relation of the University to the Community

One clear trend in defining the relationship between the university and the community or its agencies is that the collaboration is one of equals, both of whom draw value from the relationship. Gone is the notion that the university studies the metropolitan area as a laboratory or serves the city as a master. Instead, both sides understand the relationship may not be easy, but that it is a benefit to both, neither of which is the sole authority.

This concept of engagement and collaboration is spreading rapidly across the country: It is notable in the "Milwaukee idea" of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (M. J. Brukardt), and in the Great Cities Project of the University of Illinois at Chicago (Great Cities Institute); it is inherent in "Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institutions," (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 1999.)
Finding Faculty Members

The faculty is, of course, the primary means of response to the community that any university has. And present conditions call for new ways for mobilizing and motivating faculty members to do service and outreach. A major issue that confronts the university with its unitary disciplines is that community issues do not respect fields of study or faculty specialties. Universities will, therefore, need to organize faculty members according to issues, rather than specialties. At Wayne State, for example, the Skillman Center for the Child has led the way to organizing a Round Table of Full Service for the Schools, which consists of faculty members from education, psychology, sociology, nursing, medicine, social work, libraries, the Merrill-Palmer Institute, etc. (Skillman Center for Children). With such a structure, a principal or school administrator can easily find individuals most likely to address a school issue within the university, or the person consulted will probably know where to find a likely collaborator. An outsider does not have to search through a maze of colleges, departments, centers and institutes, some of which may be discouraging dead-ends. A similar structure exists at Wayne State for family and parenting issues (College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs, Wayne State University 1999). As long as it carefully develops good networks, a university does not need to reorganize to respond quickly to pressing social issues at the same time that it is being challenged by changes in the disciplines to create centers and institutes that are multidisciplinary. But to respond rapidly, it must attend to how an outsider can find his or her way around the maze to individuals with appropriate interests. Then the dialogue can be productive and the response virtually immediate. An inquiry from the community can represent a career opportunity for the right faculty member at the right time.

Faculty Development

Faculty members are now very much aware that many professionals seek training in other fields as their careers progress and their skills become dated. Wayne State offers many master's programs to professionals working in the Detroit area. Engineers already employed at Ford Motor Co. take master's work offered on computers in their offices, and doctors seek MBA's and MPH's, depending on their career tracks. Continuing education for the professions is a big business now. Offering these opportunities is the curricular counterpart to other service to the community, and major universities give much of value to professionals in these programs. Yet faculty members rarely believe that, having earned the highest degree, they should inform themselves about possibilities of
professional development in their careers — learning to teach
distance-learning courses, designing short courses and workshops,
learning about how adults learn, or even mastering the principles of
marketing their courses or programs.

Universities have the technological means to relate to the public
in ways that are unique to our time, and faculty members who do not
adapt to those means will not be able to
compete with others who have. The
student is less a captive audience than a
sophisticated consumer who may “mix and
match” his or her curriculum at a variety of
schools and colleges at the same time.
Faculty will need to plan what curricula are
suitable for distance learning and which are
not, but they cannot judge until they are
thoroughly informed about what is
possible. They will need to study the
profile of their students, a.k.a. market, in
order to motivate students effectively, and to engage other as yet
untapped sectors of students. Most students are rapidly coming to
resemble non-traditional students in the way in which they relate to
the university, and faculty members need to understand the
implications of these developments for the way they teach.

University Responsibilities

The responsibilities of institutions will change as well.
Universities will have to begin to collaborate with one another to
support very expensive programs regionally so that the costs may be
spread around and students will continue to have access within a
reasonable distance. This kind of collaboration will be particularly
important for disciplines where laboratory experience is essential
and where training sites with actual patients are essential.

Universities will also need to provide more incentives to faculty
members to do service and outreach than the institutions have
heretofore. This is especially important for research universities,
where research and teaching have long been privileged over service.
Emerging universities, like Wayne State, newly included in the ranks
of Carnegie I, have been reluctant to allow faculty members to “serve
their way to tenure.” Yet some adjustment in this posture must be
made if a more active and responsive university is urgently required.
The way in which universities have gradually addressed the issues
concerning quality of teaching has been to present measurable
outcomes in the form of student and peer evaluations, teaching
portfolios, and other evidence that students were in fact learning
what they had been taught. In scholarship, the evidence for quality
and impact have become more precise, too, in quality of journals,
citation indices, outside evaluations, etc. Now provosts or presidents
who discount the value of a given program with the public schools
have just about as much evidence as those who may be enthusiastic
about the same program — none. A first step in beginning to take service programs more seriously might be the requirement of measurable outcomes that would give both public agencies and educational institutions assurance of quality and impact of the project.

References


About the Authors

Dr. Irvin D. Reid (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is president of Wayne State University. Prior to assuming this position in 1997, he served as chief executive officer of Montclair State University and as professor, dean of the School of Business and Administration, and head of the Department of Marketing and Business Law at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

He has also served as associate professor at Howard University and as senior specialist for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Reid has been a board member or officer for several organizations including the Detroit 300 Committee, the Detroit Medical Center, the Economic Club of Detroit and the Karmanos Cancer Center. He currently serves as a member of the boards of Fleet Bank and Mack-Call Real Estate Investment Trust, both of which are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Reid has been a recipient of several honors and awards, including the Group Award from the Technology Utilization Office of NASA, the Blue Key Service Award, and the Jewish National Fund’s Tree of Life Award.

Dr. Marilyn L. Williamson (Ph.D., Duke University) is Interim Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Wayne State University. She has also served as professor, chair of the Department of English, and as associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Wayne State University.

Prior to coming to Wayne State, Williamson served as instructor at Duke University and North Carolina State University and as professor at Oakland University. She has been a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute and is the recipient of numerous awards, including the City of Detroit’s Distinguished Service Award, the Certificate of Honor from the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Board of Governors Faculty Recognition Award. Williamson is a member of the National and Michigan Women’s Studies Associations and has researched and published a book on "Raising Their Voices: British Women Writers 1650-1750."