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Outreach, Engagement, and the Changing Culture of the University

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How do you change a culture, Lou?”

Lou Gerstner responds with a shrug, and remarks, “It helps to have a crisis.” This was Gerstner’s response at a conference several years ago as he tried to change the culture of IBM during his first year as IBM’s chief executive. He was probably right. But then, there are crises and there are crises. Knowing that a crisis exists is essential—if that is the reason for changing an organization’s culture.

More often than not, an organization’s culture changes as the world around it changes. But problems can occur if cultural changes fall too far behind external forces at work. When that happens, the organization loses contact with the surrounding realities and loses its effectiveness. These problems are not limited to business and government, but threaten education as well. Institutions of higher education are particularly prone to distress when they fail to serve effectively their many stakeholders.

Public higher education is in danger of failing to respond sufficiently to changing conditions that affect the public’s need for services. Many outside higher education feel that universities need to pay closer attention to the increasingly rapid changes in American demography, social conditions, economics, politics, environment, and technology. Many within the academy concur. But changes within higher education seem to be made more slowly than are changes made outside. A recognition of the apparent failure of higher education to keep pace with societal change and to meet the additional challenges of declining funding, increased accountability, and shifts in public attitudes led to the creation in 1995 of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities.

With funding and the endorsement of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Association of State Universities and LandGrant Colleges (NASULGC) created the Kellogg Commission

to address the increasing need for change in public higher education in the United States today. Consisting of the presidents and chancellors of twenty-six public institutions, the Commission was created specifically to stimulate appropriate change in public higher education. The Commission recognized that change, if it is to occur, must take place on individual campuses and that all the Commission could do was to stimulate and urge institutions to change. A reality check for the Commission is provided by a non-academic advisory board.

At its first meeting in early 1996, the Commission identified five issues to be addressed: The Student Experience, Student Access, The Engaged Institution, A Learning Society, and Campus Culture. To date, the Commission has produced two letter-reports to presidents and chancellors: "Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience" (April 1997) and "Returning to our Roots: Student Access" (May 1998). Similar letters will be released on "The Engaged Institution," "A Learning Society," and "Campus Culture." All these letter-reports should interest people who are responsible for outreach and engagement with our society, both domestic and international. It seems obvious that any significant changes in university outreach and engagement will be accompanied by changes in campus culture. Existing culture of an institution should not significantly impede or block new approaches necessary to improve the effectiveness of the outreach function of American universities. To date, the Kellogg Commission's recommendations regarding "The Engaged Institution," "A Learning Society," and "Campus Culture" have not been determined. However, some directions seem clear.

Outreach and Engagement

Outreach is a good word. It states exactly what is involved: a reaching out from the university to the people and organizations a university serves. Outreach involves transferring knowledge and technology from the university to its constituents; the flow is basically in one direction. Outreach today includes traditional extension and public service.

Engagement is more. Engagement involves transfers in two directions: a partnership of exchange between the university and its constituents. Engagement is mutually beneficial to the university and to society and frequently involves shared goals, agendas, and measures of success. It includes working together to solve problems and share expertise. Engagement is both outreach and

“inreach” into the university. Engagement is a way universities enhance society by extending scholarly creativity and research and enhancing community participation in the arts, athletics, or advisory functions of the university. Although engagement, as defined here, is not new to public universities—especially to land-grant universities—when carried to new levels, it will involve cultural changes inside and outside the university.

Engagement is frequently a learning experience for those directly involved and, as such, should present a learning opportunity for students enrolled in our institutions. If community engagement is a meaningful learning experience, should it be regarded as a form of scholarly creativity? If so, an attitudinal shift for many within the university, and all that accompanies such a shift, will be required. To be successful, such engagement and the associated change of culture must respect the values, academic and otherwise, of all involved. Attendant issues of accountability and assessment will need to be addressed.

Today, the knowledge level of our citizens is higher than ever and rising. Our institutions of higher education are becoming more engaged with society. Lifelong learning is a reality for many of our citizens. As a result, society itself is assuming many of the characteristics of a learning organization. In many areas of our nation, true learning societies are beginning to develop

A Learning Society

What is a “learning society”?

A Learning society is one in which lifelong learning for individuals is a reality and society has developed organized ways of raising its collective educational level, of gaining new knowledge, and of applying the new knowledge. Society itself becomes a learning entity which continually develops its ability to create new tools for collective improvement. In a learning society, techniques for the intellectual improvement of workers at all levels, developed by organizations for their own advantage, are, at the same time, beneficial to the larger community. Learning becomes one of the common practices and sources of motivation of individuals. New players in the learning business (community colleges, corporate universities, for-profit educators) all contribute to the expanded opportunity for people to improve their knowledge and skill levels. New partnerships of education, business, and government are developed for instruction and for knowledge creation. Individual actions are taken with some thought to the effect on the whole.

Shared goals, values, and purposes of society become part of the societal ethic. This intellectual growth is continual.

Public universities must be key elements in the development of learning societies. The many opportunities for outreach and engagement are limited only by imagination and the potential to alter attitudes and characteristics of the common culture. Universities must be prepared to assist in helping society to capitalize on a higher level of knowledge and to disseminate, apply, and manage such knowledge. The role of the research university in the creation of knowledge seems fairly clear. But how that role is carried out may be altered by societal needs and by new partnerships. In a community in which there are many providers of educational opportunities, where partnerships are the norm, and where information technology is providing new opportunities for education, many new issues are created. Public universities will be involved in questions of regulation and deregulation of higher education, of the freedom of knowledge in an information age, and of the leadership implicit in the development of such a society. The early evolution of a learning society has been underway for some time. The full potential of such a society will require changes in attitudes, and in accepted cultural practices on and off campus. Higher education must assume the primary responsibility for changing the culture on campus.

Campus Culture

Campus culture, like all cultures, is the integrated pattern of our knowledge, beliefs, values, structures, behavior, and products of behavior that we can learn and pass on to others. A closer look reveals many aspects of cultures or subcultures on campus: the composition (including ethnicity and age) and relationship of faculty, students, and staff; disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving and knowledge creation; balance of teaching, scholarship, and service; relationship of academic, athletic, and cultural pursuits; focus on individual and/or team excellence; and many others. How the overall culture or subcultures evolve is determined, to a degree, by institutional and personal expectations, standards, and values. All are influenced by external as well as internal forces, including pressure from peers and professional associations, institutional mission and priorities, expectations of constituents (including parents and students), availability of resources, and, of course, the leadership of the institution's CEO and its governing board. For public institutions, state governments

and legislatures also affect its culture evolution. In short, our cultural dimensions are many and complex.

Public universities have been and will continue to be leading elements in the education and improvement of society. For those involved with public service and outreach—ever mindful that an institution's culture is unique—the evolution to broader engagement and determination of the appropriate role of the university within a learning society will require further changes to its culture. There can be little question that the culture of each university will change as the society in which it exists changes. The question is really whether the changes we control will occur rapidly enough, be appropriate to our mission, and protect fundamental values important to educational institutions and to society (e.g., balancing the liberal arts and professional and technical education).

During its history, American public higher education has been responsive to the needs of society. It arguably has achieved preeminence among all higher-education systems throughout the world. It has educated students and nurtured leaders through programs of excellence. It has become the foremost creator of fundamental knowledge the world has ever known and it has demonstrated the ability to meet local, national, and global needs directly through service. But today, the challenges are greater, the need for change more demanding than ever.

In its first public pronouncement of intent the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities stated, “Basking in the reflections of past glories, we will lose sight of today and risk tomorrow. We have to convince the American people that we are good enough to lead, strong enough to change, and competent enough to be trusted with the nation's future. In brief, we must take charge of change” (NASULGC 1996).

There is, of course, no guarantee that our campus cultures will be changed in exactly the right way or as rapidly as necessary. But, as Lou Gerstner said, “It helps to have a crisis” and—after a pause, added—“Leadership helps too.” We have both.

References

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About the Author

John V. Byrne (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is executive director of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities and president emeritus of Oregon State University (OSU). He previously served as dean of Research, dean of the Graduate School, and vice-president of Research and Graduate Studies at OSU and as administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. As president of OSU from 1984 to 1995, he was one of the first to introduce Total Quality Management techniques to higher education and emphasized the importance of international education. He guided OSU to continued growth despite budgets severely restricted by voter-mandated property tax limitation. In retirement he continues to advise the state of Oregon in matters of higher-education reform.