

Engagement: A Defining Characteristic of the University of Tomorrow

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Abstract

Drawing from the work and findings of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, this article makes the case for looking at university involvement with the sponsoring society in a new way, a way that emphasizes the creation of partnerships and interconnections with all elements of the society. As envisioned by the Kellogg Commission, the notion of “engagement” goes beyond traditional extension and outreach by requiring a sharing of knowledge and resources in order to serve society in a more effective manner. Engagement with others will not be an option for universities of tomorrow, be they public or private—it will be a defining characteristic.

Introduction

In 1804 world population was one billion people. By 1960 world population had reached three billion, and in July of 1999 world population totaled six billion people; it had doubled in less than forty years. Further, it is estimated that during the next fifty to one hundred years the world’s population may climb to eight, ten, or twelve billion people, with 90 percent of the growth occurring in the poorer countries. The implications of this population explosion in terms of food, health, human survivability, and sustainability of the environment are sobering. Today it requires food production from six million square miles of agricultural land to feed the world’s population. It would require sixteen million square miles of agricultural land to feed eight to twelve billion people if we were to use the agricultural practices of today. But that much agricultural land does not exist. In addition, it has been estimated that one-third to one-half of the world’s land surface has been transformed by humans (for better or for worse), one-half of all fresh water is presently in use, one-quarter of all known birds are extinct, and two-thirds of all major fisheries have been overexploited.

The challenges to sustain a healthy world population and the opportunities associated with these challenges are greater than humans have ever faced before, and they will continue to increase. But the knowledge needed to address the challenges is also increasing

exponentially. It is estimated that the totality of world knowledge doubled between 1750 and 1900, that by 1965 world knowledge was doubling every five years, and that by 2020 the totality of world knowledge will double every seventy-three days. How that knowledge is used will be determined by those who are prepared to use it. Our colleges and universities will play a critical role in meeting those world challenges and using this newly created knowledge. If higher education is to respond effectively to the challenges created by the world population explosion and the opportunities provided by the rapidly increasing available knowledge, it must change the way it operates. Higher education must constantly assess the way it functions in order to keep abreast of the rapidly changing world of which it is such an important part.

In recognition of the unprecedented speed of change within society and the need for American public universities to be increasingly responsive to the needs of the society they serve, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities was created with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The commission consisted of the presidents and chancellors (past and present) of twenty-six American public universities. Seven non-academic advisors met with the commission to provide the citizens' perspective. The commission's goal was to stimulate change and reform through discussion and action on public university campuses. The commission was created at time when a skeptical public appeared convinced that students were being ignored and that research was more important than teaching, when enrollment was projected to increase significantly at the same time that funding was limited and would continue to be so, when society was facing staggering

changes in values and family structure, and when new educational entities, such as community colleges, corporate universities, and for-profit institutions were entering the academic marketplace.

“ . . . in order to be more responsive to . . . change in society, universities themselves must change . . . ”

The commission's first meeting was in January 1996 and its final meeting in March

2000. At that first meeting the commission identified five issues for discussion and campus action: the student experience; student access; the engaged institution; a learning society; and campus culture. Letter-reports were published regarding each of these issues. Later, a sixth report about the partnership between the public

and its universities was published: “Renewing the Covenant: Learning, Discovery, and Engagement in a New Age and a Different World.” (Appendix A lists publications of the Kellogg Commission on these topics.) The commission addressed the student experience first because students are fundamental to the existence of universities. Because of its importance the student experience is a pervasive theme in all the reports of the commission.

As the commission considered student access, it became readily apparent that the issue was really not access or admission to our institutions, but a more important issue—access to a successful life in society resulting from a higher education experience.

“ . . . engagement is becoming an important characteristic of the mission of today’s university.”

Access to such a life is affected by admission policies and guidelines, by retention, and by the student’s achievement of his or her educational goals.

“Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution” focuses on the role of public universities in reaching beyond their campuses and joining in partnership with those elements of society that benefit from a shared endeavor.

The report on a learning society notes the evolving nature of society into a true learning organization. Such a society is characterized by the ability to create and use new knowledge for society’s benefit and to organize opportunities for individuals to continue to learn throughout their lifetimes: that is, lifelong learning.

In addressing the campus culture (“Toward a Coherent Campus Culture”) the commission noted that, in order to be more responsive to the increasingly rapid pace of change in society, universities themselves must change, and must do so rapidly. Their operation must become more effective, more efficient, and more flexible. In the past, as universities have responded to the many demands of society, they have evolved into institutions with a number of different cultures rather than one single culture: an academic culture, made up primarily of faculty and students, but with sub-cultures organized around disciplines; a separate student culture; an administrative culture; an athletic culture. A challenge before American universities is to integrate the elements of these diverse cultures into a single all-inclusive campus culture that mediates and bridges the diversity of cultures and is consistent with the aims and mission of American public higher education.

In recent years the differences between American private and public universities have become less evident. As state support for public universities has diminished, public universities have turned more and more to private funding. Research universities, both public and private, rely on external funding for support of research. All major universities today provide services to their societies, all are engaged with the public. Although the ideas expressed by the Kellogg Commission apply directly to public universities, most of these ideas apply equally well to private universities. This paper offers guidelines for the successful university of the future, public or private, in the context of a rapidly evolving global learning society, and is based to a considerable degree on ideas expressed by the Kellogg Commission.

The University of Tomorrow

The mission of today's university is comprehensive and complex. The mission of the university of tomorrow will be ever more so. Human development, the creation of knowledge, and direct service to society are all part of the mission. Increasingly, universities recognize the importance of diversity, the need to reemphasize teaching and learning that lead to the total development in students, the creation of new knowledge through research, and the use of existing knowledge in new and innovative ways. Through extension and outreach programs, universities are reaching learners beyond campus borders, and they are recognizing that, as agents of learning, they are critically important to the development of civil societies. The ideals on which the successful university of tomorrow will be based are evolving from the attributes of the modern university of today. As they recognize their responsibilities to a rapidly changing global society, universities of the future will:

- provide equal access to all who are qualified, develop new partnerships with K–12 to identify students who have the intelligence and motivation to succeed, and nurture and prepare those students for the university experience;
- be genuine learning communities in which faculty, students, and staff all contribute to each other's learning;
- be student-oriented, user (i.e., student)-friendly with systems that support students rather than impede their success;
- provide healthy learning environments with the equipment, facilities, instruction, support programs, and attitudes necessary for student success;

- be responsive to societal needs as they engage with their many publics—local, national, and global;
- emphasize, in everything they do, the highest moral and social values;
- be active participants in developing civil societies locally, nationally, and internationally.

The mission of the university will be one that emphasizes learning as distinct from teaching but also recognizes the importance of excellent teaching as a tool to enhance learning. The mission will include both research and the application of knowledge as a broader function: discovery. The university will also recognize that in taking on the problems and challenges of society it will be most successful when its resources, including faculty and students, are pooled with the resources and expertise of society. As part of its mission the university will be engaged with society in a sharing mode. Learning, discovery, and engagement will be integrated to achieve their optimum benefit and each will involve faculty, staff, and students.

“Engagement provides an opportunity for all—faculty, staff, students, and public—to learn together in seeking solutions to real problems.”

Engagement: A Defining Characteristic

Engagement, as envisioned by the Kellogg Commission, involves a partnership between the university and elements of society in which there is a mutual determination of goals and objectives designed to address societal problems. It implies a sharing of expertise and resources in order to serve society in a more effective manner; it goes beyond traditional extension or outreach. Engagement provides an opportunity for all—faculty, staff, students, and public—to learn together in seeking solutions to real problems. Close interaction stimulates the communication of ideas and values between all participants. This interaction enables the university to enhance and strengthen its own values and also those of society. As it is integrated with learning and discovery, engagement is becoming an important characteristic of the mission of today’s university. In the university of tomorrow it will be a defining characteristic.

Providing equal access to all who are innately qualified is an important element of engagement. True access involves an active reaching out to identify young people who have the capability to learn, not simply waiting for them to apply for admission. The successful universities of the future will provide opportunities for the intellectual and social development of all persons who have the intelligence and motivation necessary for success. Such individuals must be identified early, nurtured, and developed intellectually so that at the appropriate time they will meet the standards for entrance to higher education. Successful universities will build new partnerships with elementary and secondary schools in which university faculty will work directly with teachers to increase the number of students capable of matriculating on campus. Universities will continually improve their teacher preparation programs to meet the needs of the changing society.

As universities become more engaged with the communities they serve, it will become increasingly obvious that engagement is itself a learning process, and it will be incumbent on them to provide students with the hands-on learning experiences that come through engagement. To this end institutions should redesign their teaching, research, extension, and service functions to include students and to become even more connected to their communities. Universities must enrich student experience by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and by offering practical opportunities for students to learn. This will have a positive effect on the campus culture. It will involve integrating the students' academic experiences with activities in their community as part of preparing them for the challenges life will place before them. The learning opportunities that come with service to others undoubtedly benefit all who are involved, and the values of society and the university will be enhanced and become increasingly compatible.

The importance of learning throughout an individual's lifetime gives public universities in particular a significant, even unique, responsibility in addressing aspects of a learning society. In addition to ensuring that the demand for education is satisfied for virtually every citizen, universities must encourage research on the learning process in order to develop new ways to enhance the ability of individuals to learn during all phases of their lives. It is crucial that they equip all students with the higher-order reasoning skills needed for lifelong learning by providing programs with sufficient flexibility to meet the changing demands of an evolving workforce. Students will inform institutions about their individual needs in updating and adding to their skills and interests

throughout their lifetimes, and universities must be capable of responding. The use of computers and other interactive information technologies will enable universities and students of all ages to maintain close ties for learning and information exchange regardless of time or space.

Universities will develop partnerships—with other colleges and universities, primary and secondary schools, and government and private sector organizations—based on the knowledge and understanding that learning takes place throughout an individual's lifetime. They will encourage accreditation associations to develop standards for lifelong learning and programs offered through distance education. They will encourage public funding for lifelong learning because of the importance of continuing intellectual development to a successful society.

Creation of knowledge and understanding of the ways knowledge can be applied to problems are contributions universities can make to society. In the engaged university, faculty, staff, and students will create knowledge through research and determine innovative ways of using that knowledge to solve problems that face the communities the university serves. Potential areas for engagement include but are not limited to:

- education and the economy
- agriculture and food
- rural communities
- health care
- urban revitalization and community renewal
- children, youth and families
- environment and natural resources

The engaged university will develop an engagement plan that provides learning experiences for students through the engagement process, encourages interdisciplinary scholarship in both teaching and research, develops incentives to encourage faculty involvement in the engagement effort, and provides for stable funding to support engagement. The truly engaged university will meet the following seven-part test devised by the Kellogg Commission:

1. *Responsiveness*: Are we listening to the publics we serve and responding to their needs? Are we asking the right questions? Do we provide space and, if need be, resources

for preliminary community-university discussions of the public problems to be addressed?

2. *Respect for partners:* Do we encourage joint community-academic definitions of problems, solutions, and success? Do we genuinely respect the attitudes, skills, and capacities of our public partners?
3. *Academic neutrality:* Some engagement activities may involve controversial, often contentious issues. Has the university maintained its role of neutral facilitator and source of factual information when public policy issues are involved? Have we acted in a nonprejudicial manner?
4. *Accessibility:* Our institutions are complex organizations, often confusing to outsiders. Have we made access to our expertise and resources as simple and direct as possible for our partners? Have we made appropriate efforts to increase public awareness of our capabilities? Is our expertise equally accessible to all the constituencies of concern?
5. *Integration:* Have we integrated our engagement efforts with the other missions of the university—learning and discovery? Have we developed mechanisms to bring multiple university disciplines together to provide solutions to interdisciplinary problems? Have we provided incentives for our faculty and our students to be involved in engagement activities?
6. *Coordination:* Do all the elements of the university that are involved in engagement activities work together? Are they aware of other university engagement activities?
7. *Resource partnerships:* Are the resources we commit to the engagement activity adequate? Have we explored various funding sources with local and national governments, the private sector, and others? Have we considered other financial mechanisms such as fees for services? Have we helped our partners acquire funds?

Most universities today are engaged to some degree with elements of society. In the future, engagement will be a fundamental element of the university's mission; it will be part of the university's culture and thus closely integrated with learning and discovery. Engagement will be a defining characteristic of the university of tomorrow.

APPENDIX A

Publications of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

All the Kellogg Commission Reports are available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/kellogg/kellogg.htm>.

Taking Charge of Change: Renewing the Promise of State and Land-grant Universities. June 1996. A brochure calling attention to the Kellogg Commission and the need for public universities to change.

Returning to Our Roots: the Student Experience. April 1997. 27 pp.

Returning to Our Roots: Student Access. May 1998. 41 pp.

Returning to Our Roots: the Engaged Institution. February 1999. 41 pp.

Returning to Our Roots: a Learning Society. September 1999. 37 pp.

Returning to Our Roots: Toward a Coherent Campus Culture. January 2000. 40 pp.

Renewing the Covenant: Learning, Discovery, and Engagement in a New Age and a Different World. March 2000, 20 pp.

The Student Experience: Data Related to Change. September 1996. 24 pp. First working paper.

Student Access: Data Related to Change. May 1998. 31 pp. Second working paper.

The Engaged Institution: Profiles and Data. February 1999. 96 pp. Third working paper.

A Learning Society: Data and Questionnaires. September 1999. 44 pp. Fourth working paper.

About the Author

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