

Outreach as a Critical Link to State Support for Public Research Universities

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Abstract

During the past decade, institutional leaders and reforming bodies such as the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities have argued that institutional change is necessary in order to restore public confidence in higher education. The perception that higher education has been unresponsive to the needs of society has been accompanied by a continued and drastic slide in state support for higher education over the past twenty years. Given the significance of the state's role in financing higher education, this article examines the characteristics of outreach programs that contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of state support for public universities. Case studies of three public research universities illustrate the importance of outreach structure, communication processes, and faculty rewards as essential elements contributing to stronger state-institutional relationships, and thus, expanded state funding opportunities for these types of institutions.

Recent calls for land-grant institutions to “return to their roots” have dominated the dialogue surrounding the role of public service and outreach in the twenty-first century. Scholars have pointed out the historically important beginnings of institutional service to society, citing the early work of the antebellum colleges through the signing of the Morrill Act—the legislation that paved the way for the land-grant tradition we presently embrace (*Dyer 1999*). Today, strong leaders such as National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) President Peter Magrath have emerged to update outreach for the twenty-first century, suggesting that institutions should serve the public through “interrelated functions of teaching and learning, the discovery of knowledge and engagement—as partners with communities of social and economic interest and need. . . .” (*Magrath 1999*).

Current reform efforts have largely stemmed from a public outcry that institutions have drifted away from serving the needs of the people. A major voice of change, the Kellogg Commission on the future of State and Land-Grant Universities, sums up contemporary issues facing the academy's role in outreach: “One challenge we face is growing public frustration with what is seen to be our

unresponsiveness . . . at the root of the criticism is a perception that we are out of touch and out of date. In the end, what these complaints add up to is a perception that, despite the resources and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way” (1999).

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Accompanying this perceived unresponsiveness and decline in institutional commitment to service has been an overall drop in state support for higher education. State appropriations for postsecondary education have plummeted by more

than 32 percent since 1979, adjusting for inflation (Mortenson 1997). While the economic recession of the early 1980s and 1990s bears much of the blame for the decline in appropriations, it is reasonable to propose that a deteriorating commitment to serving the needs of the public has also contributed to the fall. The issue is critical, as state appropriations historically have been, and continue to be, the most important source of funds for all higher education (Gold 1990).

At the same time, evidence suggests that outreach is a critical link to keeping state support for public universities strong, even in times of economic uncertainty. Organizational structure, faculty reward strategies, and communication processes play an important role in determining the success of the outreach function, especially as it relates to strengthening relationships between public research institutions and their home states. Stronger relationships, in turn, may also contribute to expanded funding opportunities for these institutions (Weerts 1999).

Purpose and Methods

Given the importance of outreach as a significant link to state support for public research universities, this article examines the attributes of successful outreach programs as they contribute to building strong institution-state relationships. Because they are just as important, the article also identifies barriers to outreach that have led to some institutions, enjoying less state support.

This paper provides an overview of outreach operations within three institutions that were found to represent varying levels of

state support between FY1991–92 and FY1996–97. Previous research identified Ohio State University (OSU) as a low state support institution, the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW) as an institution that receives a moderate level of state support, and the University of Georgia (UGA) as a high state support institution. This earlier research used qualitative and quantitative methods to identify factors predicting state appropriations and suggested that outreach is a key predictor of support level (*Weerts 1999*).

Across the three campuses, the differences in outreach structure, depth of operation, and public visibility emerged as strong indicators explaining the variation in state support for the three institutions. To understand the varying features in these institutions and states, interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 key stakeholders at each of the three sites. Interviewees included campus executives, governance system staff, state department of administration staff, Republican and Democratic legislators, and governor's office staff. Interviews were conducted during the summer of 1998. In the next section, I briefly review the three institutions to illustrate the importance of outreach efforts and their role in garnering state support for public research universities.

The Ohio State University

Ohio State University has an uneasy alliance with the state legislature, and receives less support from the state than would be expected given the size and structure of the institution. Outreach is decentralized and varies significantly in depth across each of the institution's schools and colleges, and this lack of focus may be a factor in the low level of state support. While OSU operates no formal structure to coordinate outreach activities or focus the public service messages to the general public, an informal body called the President's Council for Outreach and Engagement convenes as a way to meet these objectives.

Of all the campus units, the agricultural school is the most visible and widely recognized as fulfilling the land-grant mission of the university. Historically, the college has done much to assist with Ohio's cattle and vegetable-farming economy. Meanwhile, most of the other units on campus have not met their outreach expectations, which some regard as a detriment to expanded state support for OSU. "Agriculture outreach has been very successful," claimed one OSU executive. "If all the departments were as successful with outreach as agriculture, we (OSU) wouldn't have a problem with funding."

Adding to these challenges, OSU's commitment to supporting faculty service has been under fire from members of legislature and state administration offices. Among these constituencies, a general perception exists that OSU does little to encourage or reward the public service component in faculty job descriptions. For example, some legislators point to an instance in which a faculty member was denied tenure despite the enormous service he provided to the legislature on issues of school policy.

In sum, OSU's decentralized approach to coordinating outreach activities prevents the campus from taking a strong, unified approach to outreach. Similarly, faculty rewards for service vary significantly across the institution because no formal mechanisms are in place to support outreach activity. The OSU case further suggests that the decentralized approach makes it more difficult to package and communicate the successes of outreach activities to the broader public.

The University of Wisconsin–Madison

UW–Madison's historic commitment to public service became legendary through its strong model of outreach and extension established in the early 1900s. Known as the Wisconsin Idea, the UW commitment to public service gained national recognition as a strong outreach model dedicated to serving the needs of the people in the state of Wisconsin. Among the many contributions to the state, agricultural extension units provided an enormous boost for Wisconsin's rural economy, and university faculty had a strong voice in state policy issues.

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Today, the Wisconsin Idea is best known by its past glory, not its present commitment. State officials perceive that UW outreach of the early twentieth century was evident and direct in its benefits to the common citizen, much more so than today. “Grandpa used to have a high regard for UW even though he was never a student” said one legislator. “UW faculty significantly helped him in the fields, which made an impact on his life and livelihood.” Another remarked, “UW faculty used to play a serious role in helping shape state policy, but that is no longer the case.” These sentiments seemingly reflect a growing concern that UW

has become increasingly national and international—no longer grounded in its rural roots. Like state officials in Ohio, many Wisconsin legislators perceive that the institution does not value faculty participation in public service activities.

Structural changes contributed greatly to the perceived demise in outreach at the UW campus. The outreach and extension unit was centralized and housed within the UW campus until the 1960s when, for political and strategic reasons, it was pulled out and put into its own extension campus.

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The shift had negative implications for the outreach focus within UW–Madison. Regarding this shift, one UW administrator summarized the sentiments of many: “Removing extension from the UW–Madison campus distanced us from becoming the state problem solver. We would all be better off if the unit remained on the land-grant campus like originally intended. . . .”

As with OSU, an important link exists between the structure of the outreach and communication function at UW and the struggles with getting the word out about the institution’s contributions to the state. Like those at OSU, school and college outreach initiatives at UW are largely decentralized, operating largely independently of other campus units. Stakeholders argue that the decentralized structure has impaired UW’s ability to be well known in the community and state because there is not a central body to focus the messages of public service.

The University of Georgia

Unlike OSU and UW, UGA enjoys strong state support and a reputation for its commitment to public service. The comprehensive outreach program operates under the leadership of the vice president for public service and outreach. The centralized unit oversees outreach activities in every Georgia county, including small business development centers in eighteen offices and outreach coordinators in every school. Among the many areas of outreach, UGA outreach supports textile research, peanut farming, peach growing, shrimping, the poultry industry, and business development. Over

800 faculty members have appointments focused on outreach through a public service career track that was developed to strengthen institutional support for the state.

UGA's high visibility across the state has positively affected public attitudes toward the campus, and thus state support for the university. Because the effects of the outreach program at UGA are far reaching, state officials have readily provided financial support to the institution. "UGA is seen as having people out in the community in response to them," claims one legislator. "There is a general sense that UGA is living up to its charge as the land-grant institution, and because of it, legislative and funding support for the institution has been strong." In one instance, legislators have pointed to the UGA president's appearance on a shrimping boat as a symbol of the institution's commitment to helping the average state resident.

The success of the outreach program can be linked to the stability and strength of its centralized approach and structure to support faculty service. In addition, the Office of Outreach and Public Service not only coordinates outreach activities across the campus, but packages the entire spectrum of UGA outreach activities to communicate it to the public at large.

Conclusions and Implications for Public Research Universities

Despite the strong economy of the late 1990s, many analysts suggest that the monetary difficulties of colleges and universities, once thought to be temporary, are part of long-term trends in the demand for enrollment and the supply of state funding (*Commission on National Investment in Higher Education 1997*). The message is clear: Institutions need to forge strategies for developing stronger relationships with their states in order to survive financially. This study suggests that developing strong outreach programs is one viable strategy for addressing these financial challenges.

Given the critical link of outreach to state support, the case studies provide some useful lessons for institutional leaders to consider as they plan for the future of their campuses. First, the structure of outreach is important. Centralized structures facilitate the tracking, coordination, and communication of an effective outreach program. While all three campuses (OSU, UW, and UGA) are engaged in some forms of outreach activities, UGA has clearly benefited most from the visibility of its (centralized) outreach program. The formal structure of outreach at UGA plays an important

role in facilitating and communicating the university's commitment to service.

Second, institutional commitment to public service must go beyond a change in structure: Faculty reward systems must also reflect the commitment of service to the state. Recent studies have shed light on faculty motivation and obstacles to involvement in public service activities, pointing to mission clarity, infrastructure support, and incentives and rewards as important factors leading to increased faculty motivation (*Holland 1999*). The symbolic and structural commitment to outreach at UGA is embodied in its public service career ladder.

Surrounding all of these factors is the crucial issue of resource allocation. As a percentage of total expenditures, UGA spends significantly more on public service and outreach than do UW–Madison and OSU. During the 1996–97 fiscal year, 24 percent of UGA's budget was allocated for these activities, compared to 12 percent at OSU and 11 percent at UW (*IPEDS*). This depth of investment has enormous implications for the success of the outreach unit. As this research illustrates, the depth of campus commitment to public service in dollars has a high correlation to the level of state support for the institution (*Weerts 1999*).

In sum, research institutions must find new ways to update outreach efforts in order to be stronger state partners in the twenty-first century. A natural outgrowth of this effort is greater state investment in the institution. With expanded state support, the university will have further incentives and opportunities to “return to its roots” and enhance its commitment to serving society.

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