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University Outreach and Engagement: Responding to a Changing World

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Abstract

Rapid and dramatic demographic and technological changes present the nation with enormous challenges for educating students, growing the economy, and responding to society's needs. America's colleges and universities have a central role to play in all of these critical areas—serving as agents of change as they themselves change institutionally in response to new and changing markets, multilevel partnerships, and serious challenges to institutional funding. Their effectiveness will be determined by how well they engage students, business and industry, public agencies and schools, communities, and others. This article focuses on best practices and strategies for successful institutional outreach and engagement.

Introduction

The theme of the 2004 Outreach Scholarship Conference—Impact through Engagement: Engaging Communities and Changing Lives—is especially appropriate as our society looks to higher education's role in addressing pressing problems in our volatile and challenging world. In the early 1990s, Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, captured the essence of this imperative when he asked,

> How can American higher education successfully contribute to national renewal? Is it possible for the work of the academy to relate more effectively to our most pressing social, economic, and civic problems? . . . Higher education and the larger purposes of American society have been—from the very first—inextricably intertwined. . . . In 1896, Woodrow Wilson . . . declared, "It is not learning but the spirit of service that will give a college a place in the public annals of the nation." *(Boyer 1994, A48)*

Boyer goes on to make what may be the most critical point in support of the engagement agenda by quoting American historian

Oscar Handlin: "Our troubled planet can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower. Scholarship has to prove its worth, not on its own terms, but by service to the nation and the world." Clearly, Boyer and Handlin challenge the academy to apply its considerable knowledge and human resources to address critical societal issues.

Change and Challenge

Since the establishment of the research university after World War II, higher education's contribution to advancing knowledge through basic research in wide-ranging fields has been immeasurable, and at the core of the academy. It is important to appreciate the role and place of both basic research, generated from pure intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of truth, and applied research, focused on societal challenges. Over time, both types of research have proven their worth.

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Today's environment, however, is even more challenging than the one described by Handlin. It is characterized by rapid technological, demographic, and economic changes that are creating an increasingly interdependent global community. These changes have major implications for higher education's mission and for the role of outreach and engagement in shaping higher education's response to societal needs. Such fundamental changes also create a demand for innovative approaches to the scholarship of engagement.

These changes also present the nation with enormous challenges for educating students, growing the economy, and responding to society's evolving needs. Colleges and universities have a central role to play in meeting these challenges, serving as agents of change as they, themselves, change in response to new and shifting markets, multilevel partnerships, and serious questions regarding institutional funding. Our effectiveness will increasingly be determined largely by how well we engage students, business and industry, public agencies and schools, and our communities.

Consider some of the most important state and federal public policy issues affecting higher education, as identified by the

Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges *(2003)*: homeland security, affirmative action, a challenging economic and fiscal environment, surging numbers of diverse students, steady tuition increases, reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, federal tax policy, assessment and accountability, scientific research, and intercollegiate athletics. Our future as institutions will be determined in large part by how well we respond to these issues in terms of our attitudes, the approaches we take, our ability to be innovative, and our willingness to listen to external groups and think differently about the issues.

We are facing difficult times ahead, but they are not unprecedented. Nearly seventy years ago, in the midst of the Great Depression, University of California president Robert Sproul wrote,

> Unprecedented problems today confront the universities and colleges of America. But there also faces them unprecedented opportunity. It is a time for taking stock, for looking through new lenses . . . and for critical evaluation of the university body in all its parts—tangibles and intangibles—and, above all, a firm conservatism against a shortsighted present and sacrificed future. *(quoted in Ramsey 2003)*

While the higher education community has faced difficult times before, the Association of Governing Boards' analysis of public policy issues reports that we are "in the midst of what may be the most tumultuous times in our lives for the nation and the academy. Budget crunches, war in Iraq, homeland security demands, soaring enrollments—a near 'perfect storm of challenges'" *(Association of Governing Boards 2003)*.

The recent recession and resultant budget crunch are hardly unprecedented—universities have become expert at weathering the ups and downs of economic cycles. However, funding challenges are becoming more pervasive and prolonged. Mark Yudof of the University of Texas has suggested, "In good times and bad, under Democrats and Republicans, the actual story is a long-term trend toward lower or static state support, in relative terms, for public colleges and universities. State support for higher education declined 30 percent between 1979 and 2000" *(Yudof 2002)*. This statement is supported by a 2003 report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which points out that since 1980, the share of state funds used for higher education has dropped from 44 percent to 32 percent; if states had set aside the same percentage of

tax dollars for higher education in 2002 as they did in 1978, they would have spent $27.8 billion, or 30 percent more *(Selingo 2003)*. In some states, the decline in fiscal support for higher education is even more severe. For example, at Penn State University, the state appropriation represents only 11.4 percent of the university's current overall budget, down from 20 percent in 1998–99.

The Social Compact: Public Good versus Private Gain

Given today's social, economic, and fiscal challenges, is the role of the public university as an institution that serves a public good still valid? In its recent essay, *Rewriting the Rules of the Game: State Funding, Accountability, and Autonomy in Public Higher Education*, the American Council on Education describes the transitioning social compact between higher education and the public: "Because higher education seems to have lost its ability to articulate convincingly why it is a public good, that compact appears to be dissolving into an implicit understanding of higher education as an individual good that therefore should be paid for by individuals" *(ACE 2004)*. While land-grant universities have long focused on engagement because of their special missions, it is now evident that many institutions are turning their attention to the importance of engagement, entrepreneurship, and partnerships. This may well reflect the evolving social compact between the public and the academy. In fact, the authors of the ACE essay suggest that "Perhaps . . . higher education advances the public good in today's world by serving more as an engine of economic development, rather than a driver of social mobility or civic responsibility" *(ACE 2004)*.

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Institutions are evaluating their changing roles and determining which engagement models are appropriate for them in order to become valued community partners. As revenues have declined in many cases, we in higher education have had to think even more critically about the role we play in our communities, working to help revitalize their economies and reaffirming our role as major

assets and resources for regions, states, and the nation. In return, such engagement can provide the means to generate revenues to support faculty research, student learning, and, ultimately, the public good. It is critical to note, however, that engagement is not simply entrepreneurship or a means of seeking new revenues; rather, engagement is yet another opportunity for higher education to fulfill its social compact with the public.

As we examine various challenges related to institutional engagement and explore possible engagement models, we also need to examine the professional roles of faculty and staff in outreach work; evaluate and document the impact of outreach scholarship; develop new approaches to online faculty engagement; strengthen the role of service-learning as we focus students' attention on societal issues and the relationship between reflection and research; and identify best practices and lessons learned involving institutional engagement.

Tailoring an Institutional Engagement Model

American higher education includes a rich and diverse array of institutions—urban and rural; large, midsize, and small; land-grant, comprehensive, and metropolitan; public and private; liberal arts and research. Their variety also is reflected in the diversity of their engagement models, each tailored to the special characteristics of the institution and its communities. Each institution must define an appropriate engagement role and adapt the scholarship of engagement that will serve best in changing and challenging times.

To illustrate the importance of developing an appropriate institutional engagement agenda, we wish to focus briefly on our institutions—the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Penn State University—which provide outreach and engagement models tailored to each institution's history, mission, values, and academic strengths.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County model: The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), established in 1966, is a midsize Carnegie Research-Extensive university with special research strengths in science, engineering, and public policy, a student body of twelve thousand, and selective undergraduate admissions standards. Focusing on technology commercialization, UMBC's evolving Research Park and Technology Center have been in place for fifteen years, with twenty-five biotech and information-technology companies on campus.

Many others have graduated from the Technology Center business incubator. The university's dual goals include providing a distinctive undergraduate experience and building research and graduate education. A predominantly white institution, UMBC is recognized as a national model for preparing high-achieving, underrepresented minority students in science and engineering who go on to earn terminal degrees in these fields.

UMBC has been particularly successful in engaging the external community—building partnerships and developing an aggressive entrepreneurial culture. It is seen as a strategically important participant in the immediate community, region, and state. Its multilevel partnerships involve two-way interaction with other institutions, public agencies, private companies, and school systems. UMBC recognizes not only that it has something valuable to contribute, but also that it has something to learn from constituents in the community. It has effectively identified those strengths it brings to its partnerships and communicates these to potential partners.

UMBC's engagement strategy is built on a number of key factors: a clear institutional mission; a strategic location; a passion for excellence; a strong and productive research faculty committed also to undergraduate and graduate education; energetic entrepreneurial leadership and a commitment to technology commercialization; a coordinated outreach effort involving all outreach administrative units (development, research, continuing education, internships, technology commercialization, etc.); a solid understanding of community needs; an understanding of institutional capacity; a history of strong relationships with both the public and private sectors; strategic use of advisory boards; and an understanding that the environment is interdependent. But UMBC also makes it clear that it has something to learn and gain from participating in projects—engagement at UMBC is a two-way street.

Achieving meaningful engagement involves matching institutional strengths with the needs of constituents. For example, UMBC looks for ways to apply its mathematics, science, and engineering strengths to community educational needs. One set of initiatives involves multimillion-dollar partnerships, funded by the National Science Foundation, with surrounding urban and suburban school systems. These programs respond to local and state calls for reform in K-12 math and science instruction to close the achievement gap. The initiatives focus on effective

models using faculty experts who listen and learn from teachers and students in the program.

Positive outcomes of these programs have included enhanced communication and teaching skills of public school faculty, enriched educational experiences for middle school students, and increases in test scores. Most important, perhaps, the programs have helped UMBC to build trust between the institution and the schools. By empowering teachers and students to be more effective in math and science, UMBC is demonstrating its value to the state as a major asset. As in all engagement activities, the fundamental building block and key success factor is mutual trust among partners.

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UMBC also engages the external community by building on its strengths involving both health policy research and service-learning. Through its Center for Health Program Development and Management (CHPDM), funded by Maryland's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH), UMBC works with public and nonprofit community-based agencies in the state to develop and evaluate health care programs and policies (related primarily to Medicaid) to improve the health and social outcomes of vulnerable populations. Since its inception ten years ago, the center has maintained successful partnerships with DHMH and other state, federal, and county agencies and private foundations.

Through the work of its Shriver Center, UMBC has become a national leader in promoting service-learning, civic engagement, and community-based service delivery. The center gives students opportunities to link academic study to professional practice and community service, particularly through programs designed to strengthen communities—mostly urban, economically distressed neighborhoods. The Shriver Center's Choice program is especially noteworthy, as it combines service delivery with teaching and research. Faculty, students, and staff work together to address youth-related problems of delinquency, school dropout, and joblessness. Student "caseworkers" target youth and families, chiefly in Baltimore City, providing intensive, round-the-clock supervision seven days a week. Choice youth receive

structure, guidance, and support, all of which have been proven to reduce delinquent behavior and improve educational performance.

As a public research university, UMBC shows a deep appreciation that engaging the external community is one of the most effective strategies to advance the institution's academic priorities.

Pennsylvania State University model: The concept of engagement is central to the mission of Penn State as a land-grant institution with unique responsibilities for public service and outreach in support of the citizens of Pennsylvania. Reflecting his leadership and support of outreach and engagement, Penn State president Graham Spanier chaired the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities from 1996 through 2000. The commission's report, *Returning to Our Roots*, is considered one of the seminal works in engagement and outreach within higher education. President Spanier has also championed the outreach and engagement efforts at Penn State, leading the largest unified outreach effort in American higher education, an effort that encompasses continuing education, distance education, cooperative extension, Penn State Public Broadcasting, and the Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program (PENNTAP), a Penn State unit that supports technology-based economic development. The outreach effort at Penn State is so critical to the mission of the university that the outreach organization is led by a vice president for outreach who sits on the President's Council.

Penn State University also seeks to integrate engagement and scholarship across teaching, research, and service. In support of this mission, a group of Penn State faculty and administrators formed a learning community and issued the University Scholarship and Criteria for Outreach and Performance Evaluation (UniSCOPE) report *(Hyman et al. 2000)*. The report articulates a multidimensional model of university scholarship within the continuum of various forms of teaching, research, and service scholarship. As a result of the UniSCOPE report, the Penn State faculty reward system has been restructured to provide a framework for recognizing and rewarding the full range of university scholarship in teaching, research, and service. To this end, the University Faculty Senate has established a standing Committee on Outreach to identify engagement efforts, establish evaluation models, and create recognition measures to reward outstanding performance.

To recognize faculty who make significant contributions to outreach and engagement, the Penn State Award for Faculty Outreach was created as part of the university-wide faculty and staff awards process. The award is supported by the University Outreach Council and the Faculty Senate Committee on Outreach. Each year the award is presented to a faculty member who has extended his or her scholarship to external constituents, resulting in a significant outcome for individuals, organizations, or communities in problem solving or development. In addition, many colleges within the university are now developing outreach councils within their academic colleges.

During challenging economic times, Penn State has determined to renew its commitment to its land-grant activities and engagement agenda rather than diminish that undertaking. However, in times of static and often declining public funding, such a renewed commitment requires an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to outreach and engagement. Penn State Outreach has recognized this fiscal challenge and is responding with an aggressive and strategic pursuit of grants, contracts, and revenue-generating initiatives.

In order to advance its engagement agenda, Penn State recognizes that it must understand the issues confronting the commonwealth. Pennsylvania is faced with a number of pressing social, civic, and economic challenges as outlined in a recent Brookings Institution report titled *Back to Prosperity—A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania (Brookings Institution 2003)*. In addition to identifying the challenges, the report also recommends building on Pennsylvania's areas of strength, including its robust and valued system of higher education.

Responding to this challenge, Penn State Outreach has organized its outreach and engagement efforts in the state around three thematic initiatives in areas critical to Pennsylvania's renewal: K-12 education, health, and workforce and economic development. Outreach has carved out a role as a catalyst, or connector, matching Penn State's academic strengths with the salient societal issues in the commonwealth. By becoming an integral partner in Pennsylvania's economic revitalization and addressing key health and educational challenges, Penn State Outreach will reconfirm its value to Pennsylvania's citizens.

Although it has recently renewed its commitment in these thematic areas, Penn State Outreach has long been committed to community engagement in education, health, and workforce

development, often incorporating cross-disciplinary efforts. The PROmoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) project is one such example. In 2002, the National Institute on Drug Abuse awarded Penn State a $9.9 million grant to develop community partnerships that strengthen families and help young people avoid substance abuse and behavioral problems. The five-year PROSPER project will support the development of local partnership teams in fourteen Pennsylvania school districts involving university extension staff, schools, families, and other concerned local citizens. The Pennsylvania project leaders include faculty from the College of Health and Human Development, the College of the Liberal Arts, and the College of Agricultural Sciences. PROSPER is intended to be a model for a national network of partnerships and also seeks to examine ways to sustain the local programs after funding ends.

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The Engagement Agenda: Today's Challenges

Colleges and universities today are evolving to meet the needs of a changing and, at times, volatile world. The Kellogg Commission's 1999 report urged institutions to go beyond outreach, to transform their mindsets, and to make engagement an institutional priority, a central part of the institution's mission. For institutions wanting to pursue the engagement agenda, *Returning to Our Roots* offered a seven-part test defining an engaged institution. Such an institution would be responsive, have respect for its partners, maintain academic neutrality, be accessible, integrate engagement into its mission, coordinate engagement activities, and develop strong government, business, and nonprofit partnerships in order to attract the resources that engagement demands.

Based on these criteria, public higher education clearly has made progress in terms of engagement. The scholarship of engagement has benefited from several national initiatives, such as *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place (AASCU 2002)*.

However, we must ask ourselves how we can advance even further in our engagement efforts. Many of the determinants of change outlined in the Kellogg Commission report are the same issues facing outreach and engagement leaders today, but they now bear a heightened sense of urgency. The challenges and barriers to engagement scholarship can, perhaps, be best presented through a series of questions that each institution should consider within the context of its institutional philosophy, strengths, and engagement model.

- How does higher education ensure the quality of outreach and the scholarship of engagement? What do we understand about the practice of engagement? Such an understanding is essential to ensure that appropriate supports are in place to promote faculty interest, effectiveness, and success as engaged scholars. Chief among these supports is the institutional structure to recognize and reward faculty engagement.
- How do we move outreach and engagement beyond service? What do faculty, department heads, and deans believe and understand about engagement—its scholarship, its practices, and its academic and civic contributions?
- How do various disciplines within the academy value engagement? Certain disciplines have a rich and long-standing connection with external constituents that allows them to integrate engagement more easily into their scholarship. Are there strategies that would enhance the ability and strengthen the desire of other disciplines to engage more actively with constituents? Have we examined the role scholarly societies play, beyond our own institutional cultures, in creating incentives or disincentives for faculty to practice as engaged scholars?
- How does higher education address controversy in outreach and engagement? Becoming involved in controversial issues is often an outcome of engagement scholarship, and to be influential, the university must be seen as neutral and objective. As universities become increasingly engaged, more instances are likely to arise involving conflict between external constituencies and internal university priorities. In such cases, institutions must determine how best to ensure academic freedom and the faculty's prerogative to conduct unrestricted research, while also addressing possible political considerations. It is incumbent on institutional leaders to foster healthy campus conversations regarding this issue. Moreover, leaders

must work with those outside the institution, helping them appreciate the academic perspective.

- How can higher education become more welcoming of the contributions of our external engagement partners? As higher education leaders make the case for both academic perspectives and engagement activities, it is important for those in academia to welcome and appreciate the perspectives and contributions of our engagement partners. In *Knowledge without Boundaries*, Mary Lindenstein Walshok highlights a twofold challenge for today's university vis à vis its external constituents when she notes that higher education's role in the exchange and dissemination of knowledge essential to a complex modern society remains underappreciated by the general public. She considers this state of affairs largely attributable to the universities themselves: "They have not only failed to communicate what they do, why they do it, and how it serves the public good in a free market economy of ideas and innovations, but they have not taken seriously the accelerating cycles of change affecting society and have been reluctant to recognize the significance of the exponential growth of expertise and knowledge functions outside the university" *(Lindenstein Walshok 1995, 9)*. In today's world, institutions must acknowledge the importance of establishing two-way, mutually beneficial partnerships. We need to recognize that we have much to learn from all of our partners. As we become more agile and entrepreneurial in our outlook and take the scholarship of engagement to our communities and constituents, higher education institutions must have a series of ongoing conversations within the academy about how we can be genuinely effective partners.
- For state and land-grant institutions, we must evaluate how we reconcile our public missions to meet the needs of our stakeholders with reduced public funding. Given ongoing societal changes, are we truly committed to the land-grant ideals of access and engagement, even with the severe funding pressures influencing higher education policy and programming?
- How does each institution organize to achieve effective engagement? Are we simply tinkering at the margins with our current approaches, or are we identifying and effectively acting on a vision of profound organizational change that will advance our engagement ideal?

There are no simple responses to these questions; each institution that seeks to create an effective model of engagement must develop its own strategy and organizational approach, and successfully overcome institutional challenges in order to implement that strategy. Society's need for institutional engagement, and for the scholarship of engagement, has never been greater; nor have the words of Oscar Handlin ever been more compelling—will higher education "prove its worth, not on its own terms, but by service to the nation and the world" *(quoted in Boyer 1994, A48)*?

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