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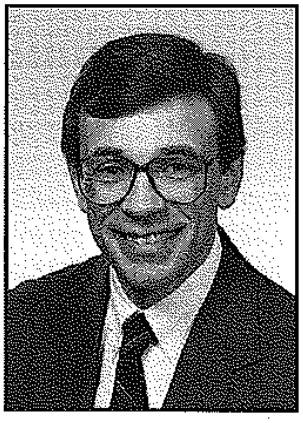

# STRENGTHENING THE UNIVERSITY'S ALIGNMENT WITH SOCIETY: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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One of the defining characteristics of the American university has been its full partnership in promoting the economic, social, and civic vitality of our nation. Over the past one hundred years, America's universities brought science to agriculture, educated the workforce for industrial expansion, provided educational access that contributed to civic literacy and social mobility, and developed the research and technology that has been instrumental in advancing every sector of American life.

This alignment of the university with the larger social agenda has resulted in enormous benefit for both the university and society. Recognizing that an investment in its universities was an investment in its own future, our nation has provided the support necessary to build what, by nearly any measure, is the finest higher-education system in the world.

Today, our society is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Such rapid and often unpredictable change forces society's institutions to adapt and realign in order to remain connected with those whom they serve. This is true for manufacturing firms, retail stores, health-care providers, governmental agencies, schools, community-based organizations, and universities.

Two challenges face universities that compel them to realign to better meet society's needs and fulfill its expectations, namely, the demands of a new educational marketplace and the need to address a complex and formidable array of social issues. The first challenge is to recast the university's role in providing advanced learning. American universities are in the process of losing what has been historically a near monopoly on advanced learning. We live in what many call the Information Age. Information is our newest commodity. People buy it, sell it, and sometimes even get prosecuted for stealing it. This Information Age has spawned a whole new educational market that continues to grow at an exponential rate. It is a market comprising people across the lifespan who must continue to learn in order to sustain their economic and social stability. It is a market that generally places a higher premium on what people know than on what degrees or credentials they have. It is a learner-driven market that places an emphasis on "just-in-time" education that is made available when, where, and in the form in which it is needed. It is a market that is producing a whole new array of educational providers, both profit and non-profit, who are challenging the university's traditional role in providing advanced learning.

Like it or not, universities must recognize that competition for this new educational market will continue to increase. Prospective students will shop for quality, convenience, and price. If universities do not adapt to the

demands of this new educational marketplace, they run the risk of losing public support.

The second challenge of alignment is to define the role of universities in addressing the complex and formidable issues that will shape the future of our nation and its people. There is no doubt in my mind that universities must be full partners in addressing such issues as being economically competitive in an increasingly interdependent world economy, improving the quality of K-12 education, overcoming the tragic human and economic costs associated with urban and rural poverty, enhancing environmental quality and sustainability, and promoting health-care access and delivery. While universities cannot and should not be expected to solve these problems, it is legitimate to expect them to help inform the problem-solving process through the responsible extension and application of their academic expertise. Not to do so is to risk the loss of public support.

Over the past six years, I have been working with colleagues at Michigan State University and more than a dozen universities across the nation to design and implement strategies for strengthening and more fully integrating the extension and application of knowledge, or what I will refer to as outreach, as a primary institutional mission. Those involved have included presidents and provosts, deans and chairs, continuing education and extension leaders, as well as key faculty members throughout the institution. What I have learned from this experience is that university leaders who are committed to strengthening and more fully integrating outreach as a primary institutional mission are more likely to succeed if they incorporate the following strategies in an overall institutional realignment plan.

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**The first strategy** is to develop an intellectual foundation for outreach that emphasizes a more seamless interaction between the extension and application of knowledge and the other dimensions of the university's academic mission. Traditionally, we have treated the academic trilogy of teaching, research, and service as if they were separate and conceptually distinct forms of professional activity. In times of limited resources, it is assumed that any attempt to strengthen one part of the trilogy must be done at the expense of the others. If outreach is to become a primary and fully integrated dimension of the overall academic mission, this "zero sum" mentality must be overcome. In its place must be developed an intellectual foundation for outreach that is consistent with the fundamental mission of the university and that reinforces all of the mission dimensions. The Michigan State University outreach model provides a useful example.

In 1993, the Provost's Committee on University Outreach, composed of faculty and academic administrators from across the campus, asserted that

"universities exist to generate, transmit, apply, and preserve knowledge. When they do these things for the direct benefit of external audiences, they are doing outreach" (Report of the Provost's Committee, 1993). Using this as the starting point, Michigan State has defined outreach in terms of four characteristics.

*First*, outreach is defined as scholarship which must be reflective, cumulative, based on current knowledge, and resulting in new insights and understandings that are subject to critical review. In other words, outreach both draws on knowledge developed through other forms of scholarship and contributes to the knowledge base.

*Second*, outreach is defined as cutting across and enhancing both the teaching and research missions of the university. In this formulation, outreach can take a variety of forms including applied research, technical assistance, demonstration projects, impact evaluations, service learning, policy analysis, and off-campus credit and non-credit instruction.

*Third*, outreach is conducted for the direct benefit of external constituents. In this sense, outreach is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means through which the university extends and applies its scholarship to directly benefit the public.

*Fourth*, outreach initiatives must be consistent with both the university and unit missions. That is, outreach not only should serve the needs of an external client group, but it should also support and enrich the overall academic mission of the university and the unit sponsoring the initiative.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of establishing a solid intellectual foundation that provides the basis of both the fundamental mission of the university and the relations of outreach to it. The efforts by Boyer (1990) and others to broaden the concept of scholarship have been useful in this regard. For example, Boyer speaks of the scholarship of knowledge discovery, integration, and application, as well as the scholarship of teaching. However, as Schön (1995) so eloquently points out, broadening the definition of scholarship to include the extension and application of knowledge requires a concurrent broadening of the epistemology that has governed universities since the turn of the century.

**The second strategy** is to create incentive and reward systems for both units and individual faculty that support the importance of outreach in the overall mission of the university. Today, on most university campuses, the faculty-reward system is out of alignment with the institution's overall academic mission. Several years ago, while I was serving as provost at a research-intensive, public university, a new faculty member came up to me and asked, "Why should I care about being a good teacher? I won't get promoted or tenured for it. I won't get salary increases for it. I can be a good researcher and achieve national recognition. However, I can be an outstanding teacher and not be known beyond my own department. So, why should I care about being a good teacher?" On most university campuses, the same reasoning would apply to outreach involvement.

If we expect to achieve excellence across the full breadth of the university's academic mission, we must recognize and reward it. Among the universities with which I have been working over the past six years, three particularly noteworthy strategies have been used to provide incentives and rewards for outreach involvement, namely, establishing a resource stream, evaluating productivity and quality, and planning. First, resource streams have been created to support both unit and faculty participation in outreach.

At Michigan State, for example, the All-University Outreach Grant program supports new faculty outreach initiatives on a peer-reviewed, competitive basis. Units that wish to incorporate outreach initiatives into their overall annual planning are eligible for reallocated funding. Second, standards by which outreach quality and productivity can be measured have been developed for faculty and unit evaluation. For faculty, that evaluation may affect merit increases or promotion and tenure decisions. For units, that evaluation has become an important aspect of the annual planning and budgeting process. Increasingly, outreach leadership has been one of the criteria for selecting and evaluating academic leaders, including presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs. Third, the annual planning process is built around the expectation that each academic unit is responsible for contributing to the full breadth of the teaching, research, and outreach mission.

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**The third strategy** is to embed outreach in the academic department where faculty members actually pursue their careers. In recent years, a number of universities have undertaken major campus-wide realignment efforts. Generally, these efforts have been initiated by presidents and provosts who have seen the need to better connect the campus with the external constituencies whom they serve. These administrators have made progress in developing a new intellectual foundation for outreach, in successfully undertaking major organizational restructuring to integrate outreach, and in developing new campus-wide policies and procedures that support faculty and unit outreach involvement. Several institutions have also begun to include outreach in the university's annual planning and budgeting process. And many universities have invested heavily in distance-education technology, allowing the campus to accomplish its outreach mission in new and creative ways.

While all of these campus-wide, "top-down" initiatives represent important steps in enhancing the outreach mission, they are not sufficient to produce the kind of fundamental realignment that is required if the extension and application of knowledge is to become in fact, and not just in institutional rhetoric, a vital and energetic element of the overall academic mission. For real change to be accomplished, the focus ultimately must be on the academic department — where graduate students and young faculty members are socialized into the professoriate and first learn what is valued and what is not, and where careers are defined and advanced. The challenge is to stimulate departments, along with their learned societies, to define more clearly the role of outreach in the work of the discipline or profession. While several universities have begun to address this challenge, it is too early

to know if their efforts will succeed. This is an area that lends itself to groups of universities working together.

**The fourth strategy** is to redefine access priorities consistent with the learning needs of the Information Age. On most university campuses, discussions related to access revolve around keeping tuition levels low and assuring that admission criteria do not inadvertently discriminate against certain categories of people. More fundamental access questions need to be asked: Access for whom? Access to what? Access when? Access where? Sophisticated distance-learning technologies are serving as a catalyst for broadening our thinking about access by allowing us to create "virtual campuses" that are not limited by time and space.

The importance of clearly defining access priorities is underscored by the following example. Several years ago, the dean of a college of engineering at a large midwestern campus indicated to me that he would like to spend more time serving the continuing professional education needs of practicing engineers, but he lacked the capacity to do so because of the 3,500 undergraduate majors enrolled in his college. Implicit in this statement was an approach to access that places first priority on undergraduate pre-professional students with a commitment to serve the continuing professional education needs of practicing engineers only if excess resource capacity exists. It can be argued that, if learning across the lifespan is a necessity for engineers as it is for other professionals, then it may be appropriate to limit the number of undergraduate students to 3,000 so that professional engineers can be better served. My point is that universities need to pay close attention to ensuring that their policies regarding access are consistent with the needs of the society that they serve. In this particular case, it could be argued that society is better served by having fewer pre-professional engineering students and providing continuing education for practicing engineers. Universities will never adequately address the lifelong learning needs of society if they depend on the availability of "excess capacity" to do so. Access priorities must be established by allocating resources accordingly.

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**The fifth strategy** is to strengthen the university's capacity to organize knowledge around problems as well as around disciplines. If universities are to forcefully engage the complex issues confronting society, they will need to improve their ability to engage in interdisciplinary problem-focused work. This capacity requires a "low walls" academic environment that includes incentives and rewards for working across disciplinary boundaries.

Interdisciplinary problem-focused activity is far easier to talk about than to do. Disciplines must overcome different languages, different theory bases, and different ways of viewing the world. On most university campuses, very few forces promote interdisciplinary work and many inhibit it. A useful first step in addressing this issue may be to ask a panel of faculty from across the

campus to identify those forces that influence both positively and negatively the involvement of faculty in interdisciplinary work.

**The sixth strategy** is to advance the pedagogy of outreach in order to maximize its impact. On most campuses, the pedagogy of outreach is primitive. We like to assume that if people are exposed to knowledge, they will act on it, even though we know that this is often not the case. How we design a particular outreach initiative will influence the extent to which the desired outcomes are achieved. The following example illustrates the point.

Several years ago, faculty from Michigan State were working with representatives from a large Michigan health-care corporation to design a new prenatal care program for a predominantly low-income community. One day, in a meeting with physicians involved in the project, I asked them how MSU could be most helpful. They responded that they would like the university to help them increase program compliance; that is, to increase the percentage of women who adopted healthy lifestyles as a result of the program. What they needed was help in designing the learning experience in order to improve the outcome. They wanted a more powerful pedagogy.

Universities that are committed to strengthening the impact of their outreach initiatives should fund research and evaluation designed to deepen insights regarding outreach pedagogy. Alternative pedagogic approaches need to be developed and evaluated for their impact.

**The seventh strategy** is to better prepare faculty to engage in the outreach process. Most universities do very little to prepare faculty to engage in the extension and application of knowledge. We have teaching assistantships and research assistantships. Why not outreach assistantships?

If universities want their outreach activities to reflect the same excellence that they expect from teaching and research, we cannot expect faculty to simply intuit themselves into the process. High-quality outreach requires faculty who are sensitive to constituent cultures and values, experienced in building trust and confidence, able to speak in ways that the public can understand, and respectful of the knowledge that the external client brings to the relationship. Indeed, true partnership between faculty members and external clients exists when they view themselves and their partners as both teachers and learners, where both have something to contribute and gain from the partnership.

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Universities committed to outreach excellence will invest in faculty development that supports the full breadth of the academic mission including outreach. Mentoring programs, special faculty seminars and colloquia, as well as release time to engage in outreach initiatives are but a few of the ways faculty can develop outreach expertise.

**The eighth strategy** is to assess more adequately the quality and impact of outreach programs and services. Outcome assessment is a fact of life in today's university. No longer is the public willing to accept as an article of

faith that everything we do is good and deserving of support. Universities are being asked to demonstrate "value added" in every dimension of their work.

What is the "value added" of the university's outreach programs and services? Do they make a difference? I would propose two foci for impact assessment. First, to what extent does a particular outreach program or service have a demonstrable impact on the intended audience? What difference did it make? Second, to what extent did the outreach program or service enhance the research and teaching mission of the university? If the outreach program is to become a fully integrated element in the overall academic mission, then the university should put the highest priority on outreach programs that accomplish both objectives.

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**The ninth strategy** is to strengthen campus-wide leadership on behalf of outreach. Many universities have recently created senior-level positions for academic administrators who are charged with overseeing the outreach mission of the campus and ensuring its general health and vitality. While this is an encouraging sign, I believe that outreach leadership will increasingly be spread among all of the stakeholders. Presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs will feel as much ownership and responsibility for the outreach mission as they do for research and teaching. They will define their outreach agenda in a way consistent with their department/college/campus mission and the constituencies whom they serve. Accordingly, universities need to make outreach leadership a prime criterion for selecting, developing, and evaluating academic leaders.

**The final strategy**, and the one that may be the least tangible and most important of all, is to develop within the university the capacity to look honestly at itself and its work. Several years ago, I listened to a speech by the recently retired chairman of General Motors, who was asked to explain why the American auto industry had fallen so far so fast during the 1970s. His response was revealing. He said the problem was not in union wages, or manufacturing obsolescence, or any of the other excuses that are so often heard. Rather, he said, the fundamental problem was hubris; that is, the tendency on the part of industry leaders to believe they were the best in the world and would always be. This hubris, or arrogance, acted as a filter that prevented the industry from seeing the signs of trouble that were so clear to everyone else.

Like the automobile industry, universities have good reason to be proud of what they have accomplished. However, we can get so caught up in how good we are that we fail to see problems that are right before our eyes. Like the auto industry, we can blame our public-relations division for not telling our story well enough, the assumption being that if the public really understood what we do, they would be less critical and more supportive. In

fact, universities can and must do a better job of telling their story, but that will not be enough. We must take a close look to see if what we offer to the public in this time of social realignment is what the public wants and needs. Developing the institutional capacity to regularly disabuse ourselves requires strong leadership from the top and the courage to manage change when change is needed.

Does the modern university have both the capacity and willingness to change in order to realign itself with society's new realities? Zemsky and Massy (1995) put the challenge in bold relief when they write, "There is a growing sense that colleges and universities have become too set in their ways to change — the last holdouts against the restructuring that is recasting the American enterprise."

It goes without saying that there are many who will resist the changes advocated in this discussion. However, I am convinced that there are stronger forces that will drive and support change. Internally, they are represented by the voices of an increasing number of university leaders who have both the vision and commitment to put the wheels of change in motion. Externally, they are represented by the voices of manufacturers, health-care providers, teachers, social workers, government leaders, farmers, and citizens who are making it clear that they want their universities to be full partners in addressing the challenges that they confront. For both society and the university, the stakes are high and there is little time to lose: the university must realign itself in fundamental ways if it is to effectively serve the needs of a society in transition. ■

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