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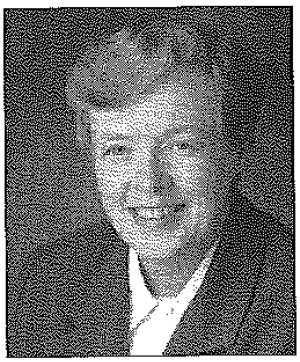

# Constructive and Complex Tensions in the Art of Engagement

Lou Anna Simon
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Michigan State University

It took a combination of bold courage and twenty-twenty foresight to create the land-grant institution in the mid-nineteenth century. Redesigning our institutions to meet the needs of the coming century will take similar boldness and foresight. The twenty-first century will be marked by constructive and complex tensions as universities continue on their journey of deepening their engagement with society. They will wrestle with tensions over how to fulfill a social role that is changing, as are society's needs and expectations. Tension serves simultaneously as a threat and an opportunity. Michigan State University, as well as other land-grant institutions, was created because the public believed universities were not working on behalf of society as it was redefining its needs for education and new knowledge generation. Universities of the 1850s effectively used high-quality arguments to limit student access, the inclusion of new fields of study, and the scope of legitimate inquiry in service to society. Thus, fundamental to the establishment of MSU as the first land-grant institution were three challenges:

- Being elite without being elitist,
- Melding the art of knowing and being (represented by the liberal arts) with the capacity for knowing and doing (represented by the emerging disciplines and professional fields of study), and
- Broadening the number of voices that define relevant problems, and positioning them at the forefront of knowledge generation.

With the evolution of the U.S. higher-education system and its aspiration to be viewed in an ever more positive light, policies and practices of the land-grant university were easily deflected from founding principles. For example, quality can be described by inputs instead of the value added. Checklists of courses can replace efforts to integrate the liberal arts and professional education. Problem selection in the interest of society can become uncoupled from cutting-edge research that advances the "academic" interest of the faculty, the discipline, or the profession.

At Michigan State, the approach of our sesquicentennial provides the impetus to sharpen our focus and ask: "If society were creating the research-intensive, land-grant university in 2005, what would such an institution be?" As I have observed land-grant universities in this century, four characteristics have emerged that would be among the dominant features of this twenty-first-century creation. Clearly, the ideal of access would be deeply embedded in concerns about *information technology:* its capacity, its ethical use, and its reach into all socioeconomic strata of American society. A focus on *economic competitiveness* would be reflected not only in the melding of liberal arts and professional programs, but also in the capacity to realign "knowledge silos" to create, synthesize, and apply cutting-edge scholarship in ways that significantly influence the issues of today and anticipate the issues of tomorrow. A focus on *quality of life* would be reflected in the capacity and the will of individuals and communities to learn and to speak out about the impact of current or proposed global, national, regional, and local policies and practices. The reinvented land-grant university would be especially mindful of its responsibility not only to analyze or propose policy in one area, but also to look at that policy's implications in other domains.

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Simply put, the twenty-first century land-grant institution will provide the platform, the will, and the incentives for scholars in a research-intensive environment to use their special skills to achieve the powerful relevance to society that the Kellogg Commission has envisioned as an "engaged institution." In the book, *University-Community Collaborations for the Twenty-First Century* (Lerner and Simon 1998), several authors outline challenges and advance case studies that demonstrate how universities can be committed to the highest standards of scholarship while relishing the opportunity to work in service to society.

We enter this new era with the historical perspective that throughout nearly one hundred years, higher education has survived by "creating new roles and by adapting its mix of roles to fundamental changes in the nature of society and its practical needs" (Bonnen, in Lerner and Simon 1998). The outreach role is the most complex of the traditional institutional missions in this new century. It wrestles with the alignment of institutional values and priorities, and focuses on the university's social role of promoting the "common good." Clearly, a key to our success in the art of engagement is building on Ernest Boyer's work, which underscores that the key missions of the academy — teaching, research, and service — are all different manifestations of a

scholar's core concern; that is, knowledge and its generation, transmission, application, and preservation (Boyer 1990).

At Michigan State, a provost-empanelled committee, charged with reviewing the university's role in serving society, inextricably coupled outreach (or engagement) with scholarship. Its 1993 definition of outreach scholarship has guided our efforts since: "Outreach is a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research, and service. It involves generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways that are consistent with the university and unit missions" (Provost's Committee on University Outreach, p. 1). The twenty-first century model of outreach that connects the university with society's efforts to resolve its practical problems depends on a faculty that are engaged, collectively and individually, in bringing their expertise and inquiry to bear on societal problems.

By embedding this definition of outreach scholarship in the university's planning process, we have encouraged units and individuals to develop concepts and engage in outreach using unit-based resources and grants to fund programs that fit this definition and the unit's unique disciplinary or professional culture. The effort has been further enhanced by recognizing scholarship across the mission in the university's promotion and tenure criteria, and through developing the document, "Points of Distinction," which provides a guide for planning and evaluating the quality of outreach at the unit level and in the context of faculty personnel decisions (salary raises, tenure, promotion). In addition, Michigan State is working with other peer institutions to refine indicators that can be used to promote better acknowledgement of and accountability for outreach programs.

Each success, arising from outreach efforts grounded in cutting-edge scholarship, often is accompanied by additional challenges. As I look at the issues and challenges, three are especially instructive and sharpen our focus on the kind of land-grant institution the public would reinvent for the next century.

First, we all recognize that problems are inherently multidisciplinary. We have experienced some success in beginning outreach projects with a broadly based, but fixed team with expertise to work with our partners on these projects. Yet, as the work unfolds, we often find the required expertise and distribution of effort across team members differ from initial projections. Thus, we must learn to be agile thoughout the life of the project, not just in the planning phase. We must find ways to meet immediate needs of an outreach project, while also accommodating work that must conform to timelines determined by grants or the rhythm of scholarly inquiry and the academic calendar.

Second, we must consider how better to define "sustainability" in the context of outreach scholarship. Even though we are often criticized for lacking the persistence necessary to achieve a significant impact, "engagement" cannot mean permanent

engagement. Our partners often feel the university's involvement is critical for success, even when the project has the capability to be run by the community. Similarly, partners often believe the university should continue its engagement when new and different issues have been identified beyond the mutually agreed scope of the initial engagement. Outreach faculty and staff can work with key partners to resolve these issues on a case-by-case basis. However, if outreach is to become a component in the integrated work of faculty and staff at the unit level, we must find better ways for faculty and public partners to learn and implement the art of a graceful and timely exit from outreach projects. The currency of sustainability is a combination of trust and broad applicability of cutting-edge knowledge. That leads to the third challenge.

**How do we maintain the quick agility required in our fast-changing, competitive environment and sustain the insightful reflectiveness of the scholarly pace?**

The fact that a problem has been defined in inter- or multi-disciplinary terms, or that a project team is broadly based does not, in and of itself, ensure that the recommended programs, policies, or practices are transferable to other contexts. In fact, a solution can cause problems to arise in other areas. For example, the reclaiming of a brownfield in an urban setting for new housing developments may have a negative effect on those who live in the neighborhood if opportunities for new, low-income housing are not included in the mix. We at the university are uniquely positioned to promote the transport of ideas and recommendations from one venue to another, and to promote innovative thinking on the broader implications of particular patterns of policies and practices. However, our project orientation and accountability rules may push us to focus too exclusively on projects, rather than directing equal attention to the "big picture" or the overall system.

As the provost of an institution that is both research-intensive and land-grant, these observations grow out of my reflections on the kind of institution we are working to be in 2005. There are constructive and complex tensions in the new intellectual model that aspires to a continuous braiding together of research and outreach. As I listen to faculty and to our outreach partners, I realize enormous tensions are a given for the effectively engaged university in the next century. How will we be both nationally competitive in the traditional mode of academic reputation and engaged — as individuals and as communities? By what measure do we ensure that our "public-good" focus is evaluated by more than accountability and reputational rankings? How do we think about and reflect the collective view that permits

the common good to be part of all we do? How do we balance a commitment to meeting "customer satisfaction" in our partnerships and address the very long-range needs of society? How do we maintain the quick agility required in our fast-changing, competitive environment and sustain the insightful reflectiveness of the scholarly pace? How do we engage with cutting-edge projects, and disengage when they become routine but still important to the community? How do we balance the focus on the particular problem with a broader, more systemic overview, when we cannot predict the value that will be added by taking the longer view? How can we gain permission and funding to make contributions that will have value for decades to come? How do we find non-monetary incentives in the system for unfunded outreach scholarship work? How do we account for public contributions and participation in outreach that demonstrates community "buy in?" How do we move from problem solving to asset investment and social capital building? How do we unite cutting-edge work with its practical translation? These questions are consequences of our initial successes on the journey of engagement with society that began, for Michigan State University, in 1855. These questions also serve to illustrate the challenges that individual faculty and the institutional community must address with the same bold courage and twenty-twenty foresight that reframed the university's social role almost 150 years ago, if we are to be of greater service to society in the twenty-first century. ■

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Author's Notes

Depending upon the criteria used, Michigan State is considered either the first land-grant institution or, together with Penn State, one of the first two.

**About the Author**

Lou Anna Kimsey Simon (Ph.D. Michigan State University) is provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at Michigan State University and professor in the department of Education Administration.

She holds a bachelor of arts degree in mathematics and a master of science degree in student personnel and counseling, both from Indiana State University. She earned the doctorate in administration and higher education.

Simon has a long history of experience in academic administration including assistant to the president, associate provost and provost at MSU. As provost, she is actively involved in teaching, research, and service.

Simon recently edited with R.M. Lerner the book *University-Community Collaborations for the 21st Century: Outreach Scholarship for Youth and Families,* published in 1998.