



Engagement and the Twenty-First Century University

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As a new century — a new millennium — approaches, it is difficult to avoid being swept up in soaring rhetoric about change, challenges, and new eras — typically wrapped up in such fancy terms as tectonic shifting of plates or, perhaps less earth shattering, paradigm shifts. Yet as we move into the future, startling change is truly upon us — and it is having a major impact on the enterprise of higher education. We need think only of the dramatic consequences in the past ten years or so flowing from the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the information technologies that are radically transforming communication and the compilation of information, and the new environmental awareness of the fragility of life on this planet.

These circumstances and the indisputable fact that universities are critical ingredients in the economic and social success of any society — and most assuredly the American one — have profound consequences for universities as we enter the twenty-first century. These consequences are uniquely applicable to state and land-grant universities, for these institutions have historically been people-serving institutions, playing vital roles in economic and social development. In a sense, the genius and the unique contribution of America to higher education is the land-grant model. It has evolved into something far broader than its original formulation in a different century based much more on agriculture and rural American life. Today, in fact, the model applies to the entire universe of human needs, to the extent that universities have the capabilities and talents to help attack the problems of their local communities, their larger state and region, and, beyond that, the nation and the world.

We have typically characterized the land-grant model as one built around teaching (as many people as possible), research (both so-called basic and applied), and something labeled as “service.” And the service component of this traditional trilogy has historically been identified as cooperative extension for the agriculturally involved universities, but also as outreach of various kinds from the academic programs and capabilities found throughout universities, whether or

not they offer agricultural programs. Today, we increasingly use the term "outreach" to describe a mission of reaching out and serving various communities of needs and interests. It has seemed to me, however, that "service" is always listed third, and the implication is that it is not as important; unjustifiably, the term has the aura of being a gentle burden, a kind of noblesse oblige that flows out of the

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much more important educational work of teaching and research. My proposal, since trilogies are hard to escape, would be that we redefine the mission of the twenty-first century university to focus on one overriding objective: serving the public. And that our universities do this through the interrelated functions of teaching and learning, the discovery of knowledge (research), and engagement — as partners with communities of social and economic interest and need,

including businesses, cities and towns, and governmental organizations.

Because of a clear conviction that thoughtful change is essential, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities came into being. Consisting of twenty-five current and two former chancellors and presidents from a wonderful diversity of American universities, and assisted by a panel of critical but friendly lay advisors, the commission has issued three reports or calls to action for the consideration of America's universities. The first insisted that the needs of students were fundamental to a successful democratic society; the second spoke to the complicated but equally essential function of providing access for as many students as possible; and the third report, just out, calls on universities to be engaged institutions.

All of the Kellogg Commission reports — and indeed the panel's ethos — are premised on the fact that teaching and learning, research, and engagement and outreach are interrelated; and needed to nourish the public-serving university for the next century. As a commissioner, I am obviously partial to its views and suggestions. But I believe we are on the right educational path, not only because the recommendations and conclusions have educational integrity, but for two other reasons. The first is that requests for the just-released report, formally titled "Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution," (1999) have far exceeded our expectations. I think that tells us something about both the report and the impulses that it speaks to. And second, the very structure of the commission and its leadership are noteworthy: Virtually all of the universities represented through their presidents are significant research-intensive universities, ranking high in the measures of traditional academic prestige. None of these leaders would for one moment

wish to pull back from the fundamental mission of discovering knowledge through faculty research, but all of them are insisting that engagement, as well as remitting attention to the needs of students, is equally central to the mission and aspirations of their university.

The report speaks for itself, but is crystal clear in its insistence that the engaged institution in the century before us must accomplish at least three things:

- It must be organized to respond to the needs of today's students and tomorrow's, not yesterday's.

- It must enrich students' experiences by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and offering practical opportunities for students to prepare for the world they will enter.

- It must put its critical resources (knowledge and expertise) to work on the problems faced by the communities it serves.

This report provides, in addition to a practical seven-part test defining an engaged institution, specific examples of how eleven of the participating universities have structured their activities and

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commitments to engagement. (Beyond the shorter report itself, the commission has also prepared a more extensive, illustrative booklet describing in considerable detail the extent of these universities' engagement beyond their physical boundaries, as examples that other universities might study as they weigh their own circumstances and particular missions.)

As we think through the exciting opportunities and obligations before the American university in the next century, it is well to remember that

effective and expanding engagement provides not only educational expertise and service to communities, but that it does so in partnership ways in which universities are co-equal partners with other organizations and interests.

Equally significant, engagement provides rich opportunities for students to learn and faculty to teach effectively through internships, community-based projects, and countless activities as varied as the human imagination. And even more, engagement provides a rich opportunity in countless arenas for faculty to study and to derive data that can lead to new results. To those who might be skeptical that such opportunities exist, I would point only to the example of the significance of work in the vital field of child and youth development as it has emerged at such places as The Center for the Study of Child and Adolescent Development at the Pennsylvania State University, the Institute for Children, Youth and Families at Michigan State University, and the Center for Child, Family, and Community Partnerships at Boston College.

A second and rich mine of activities and possibilities exists in Mary L. Walshok's superb book, "Knowledge Without Boundaries" (Jossey-Bass 1995), which also provides explicit and compelling illustrations of the success of community engagement programs including ones at the University of California at San Diego. One of those UC-San Diego programs that has been spectacularly effective is called CONNECT, a program economically and successfully beneficial to the San Diego region. At the same time it has enriched university researchers in such vital fields as biotechnology through the insights of industry researchers who are technically "outside" of the university.

Ultimately and finally, of course, true engagement in the university of the twenty-first century will not occur unless academic disciplinary boundaries erode (as they are beginning to) in ways that facilitate inter- and multidisciplinary work by university teachers and researchers. Nor will it fully blossom unless the involvement of many, if not all, faculty in our universities through engagement with their communities as part of the teaching and learning and research functions of the university is rewarded in the real currency of the realm—status and salary. The obstacles and barriers may seem formidable, but they are not insuperable. Over time America's universities have always responded to the needs of the society of their time, whether it was in transforming a rural America into an industrial America, or in serving the national interest during World War II and the long Cold War. Now it will be in serving the transformation of America and the world into a knowledge and information driven society.

Making this kind of change and readaptation of the land-grant philosophy as engagement in partnership ways is the right thing in our society's interest. It is also the smart thing for America's universities who wish to attract the resources and support needed for the fundamental mission of discovering, disseminating, and applying knowledge. The statement-and commitments-of the Kellogg Commission's presidents and chancellors on the imperative of engagement points us in the right direction for the new century we are now entering. ■

References

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Author's Note

Those interested in examining these issues further will profit by reading the book by Richard Lerner and Lou Anna K. Simon titled, *University-Community Collaborations for the Twenty-First Century: Outreach Scholarship for Youth and Families*. Garland Publishing, 1998.

About the Author

C. Peter Magrath (Ph.D., Cornell University) assumed the presidency of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) January 1, 1992. As CEO of the nation's oldest higher-education association, Magrath represents NASULGC's member institutions in Washington, D.C., and in educational settings around the nation on issues of national importance to the higher education community.

Founded in 1887, NASULGC is a voluntary association of 202 public research universities and land-grant colleges located in all 50 states and the U.S. territories. Its universities enroll more than 3.2 million students, award about one-third of all bachelor's and master's degrees, and grant 60 percent of the doctorates earned in the U.S. Magrath took over the leadership of NASULGC as the association charted a new course for the 1990s by implementing a plan to reorganize and streamline its structure.

As past president of three public universities, Magrath brings a broad perspective on higher education to his current job, including a long history of leadership in international education activities. His many national involvements have included service in 1992-1993 on the Commission on the Future of the National Science Foundation, a group of scientists, industrialists, and academic leaders that made recommendations to help chart future directions for the Foundation. More recently Magrath organized the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, consisting of twenty-seven present and former presidents of major public universities, that is promoting an agenda of change and renewal as higher education moves into the twenty-first century. He also serves on the Southern Education Foundation's advisory committee dedicated to promoting educational opportunity for African-American and minority students in Southern states.

A political scientist with a B.A. degree from the University of New Hampshire and a Ph.D. degree from Cornell University, he served as president of the University of Missouri System from 1985-1991. Previously, he was president of the University of Minnesota — with 60,000 students, the largest U.S. campus in terms of enrollment — from 1974-1984. Before that, Magrath headed the State University of New York at Binghamton from 1972-74. Missouri, Minnesota, and Binghamton all are NASULGC institutions.

Between 1968-72, Magrath held faculty and administrative posts at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln — also a NASULGC member. He began his academic career at Brown University, moving from instructor to professor of political science from 1961-68, as well as serving as associate dean.

The author of numerous books, monographs, and articles on American constitution law and history, higher education, and international affairs, he has been active on many national higher education commissions, task forces, and committees. Magrath has been recognized with honorary doctoral degrees from Brown University; Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, Romania; the University of Nebraska; the University of New Hampshire; the State University of New York at Binghamton; and most recently, Michigan State University. In 1998, the University of Minnesota honored him by naming the central library on its St. Paul campus after him. He is married to Deborah C. Howell, Washington bureau chief for the Newhouse Newspaper Group and editor of Newhouse News Services.