



Retrospect and Prospect: Understanding the American Outreach University

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Retrospect

Few things can send readers scurrying toward the exits faster than yet another call for yet another research agenda in American higher education. Words like *plethora* (with its medical images) and *surfeit* (with its connotation of gluttony) aptly suggest the excess of information that exists concerning nearly every facet of the American university. Can it be possible that we need to know more about anything? Yes. We know very little, comparatively speaking, about the so-called third mission of American universities, the public service or "outreach" mission. What we need is a clearer understanding of those functions of the university variously associated with such terms as service, public service, professional service, extension, and outreach. For those who may not be enthusiastic about such research, let it be noted that there is practicality in such an undertaking. The dearth of knowledge concerning the outreach mission seriously impedes our ability to understand it, improve it, or explain it to the public (many of whom respond with blank stares when we talk about public service and outreach). What we really need to know is actually less; that is, we need to distill and blend existing research to produce useful, cogently written syntheses of the history of the outreach university and thoughtful, well-argued estimates of its present condition. Let's begin with some considerations about the history of outreach in American universities. First, let's agree that history is complicated and that one of the tasks of historians is to convey that complexity in understandable ways. Second, let's accept, for the purpose of argument, that even historians (perhaps *especially* historians) don't know very much about the history of outreach in American higher education. To be sure, a lot of informed opinion exists, but when you begin to dig around you find that the research is usually thin and the interpretation mostly superficial. What passes for the history of outreach is a none-too-inspiring pastiche of chronicle-verging-on-mythology and rhetoric-verging-on-propaganda. Why? Because there have not yet been significant attempts to forge historical syntheses

of the outreach university or to outline the major gaps in the scholarship. We need such efforts to enable us to understand the subject and to be a little more careful (and maybe a little more honest) about the history of outreach. Let me illustrate. Raise your hand if you can give a clearly stated, thirty-minute talk about the evolution of what is known today as the American outreach university. What is usually included in such orations? They typically begin by observing that the nine colonial colleges were private institutions that existed only to train clerics and thus had no public service mission. Wrong. As the distinguished American historian Jurgen Herbst demonstrated some years ago, the colonial colleges were not private institutions but were in the broadest sense public institutions that were joint creatures of state and church. And, in the broadest sense, they did have strong commitments to serving society, but not in the same way that American universities would conceive of the task in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The orations continue with a bow to Thomas Jefferson and his interest in the usefulness of knowledge, charge on through the Revolutionary era (with an asynchronous reference to George Washington's hopes for a national university) and announce that with the coming of state universities shortly after the Revolution, there was a new emphasis on the utilitarian. A lamentation follows.

Unfortunately, it is argued, the new state universities were too weak and under-supported through the early part of the nineteenth century to pursue public service in any broad way largely because state legislatures were chock full of visionless skinflints more interested in feathering their own nests than in doing what was right for the American people. Darkness descended. Then Justin Morrill, a little-known Vermont congressman, began agitating for the granting of federal lands to establish people's universities (a brilliant new concept, it is said) which would counterbalance the hopelessly conservative, denominationally sponsored, private colleges. A New Era dawned. Once the federal government made land available for the support of these new institutions, which were to educate farmers and engineers, the way was cleared for a succession of equally enlightened federal laws: the Hatch Act of 1887 establishing the agricultural experiment stations; the Morrill Act of 1890 giving birth to black land-grant institutions; and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 which brought us (in time) the Cooperative Extension Service. Along the way, we learn, heroes appeared in timely fashion to secure the future of extension, public service, and outreach, most notably, perhaps, Morrill himself and Seaman Knapp, the putative father of the extension movement. The actual story, of course, is much more complicated and compelling. A large portion of the complexity and some of the more interesting facets of the narrative reside in the early days of the land-grant movement and are captured in older books that celebrate the movement as well as try to understand it. The two best known of these are *Colleges for Our Land and Time: The Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (Eddy 1957) and *Democracy's College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative*

Stage (Ross 1942). Ross' book, written in 1942 from the perspective of the president of a land-grant institution, is still valuable, as is the Eddy volume, written twenty years later by a provost and vice president at another land-grant college. Both offer a traditional narrative history with little analysis or interpretation and are constructed upon foundations mainly of secondary works with little primary research beyond printed documents. Each is rather badly dated yet valuable in its own way. For a clear (and briefer) synthesis of the early days of land-grant, I turn to the first fifty pages in another book, *The Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education: George W. Atherton and the Land-Grant College Movement*, by Roger L. Williams. Published in 1991, Williams' book helps us understand the emergence of the land-grant system in several contexts including that of higher education in the antebellum period, the beginnings of utilitarian education, the rise of professional science, the origins of agricultural science, the emergence of agricultural colleges before the land-grant act, and the political context in which the land-grant movement coalesced. Finally, Williams offers a crisp overview of the first ten years of the land-grant colleges.

Understanding a little about these contexts is awfully important to a better comprehension of the land-grant movement. For example, Williams deftly synthesizes a whole range of scholarship that raises

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questions about the nature, character, and efficacy of antebellum higher education. This has a lot to do with land-grant. Historians of an earlier generation portrayed the antebellum colleges as hopelessly anachronistic institutions wedded to an outmoded style of classical education. The coming of the modern university, it was argued, brought real, purposeful, and useful

collegiate education to the United States. In the process, land-grant colleges formed the basis for a utilitarian, democratic system of higher education that was unique in a worldwide context. Williams teaches us about new research that throws the antebellum colleges in an entirely different light, pointing out that the education that they offered was in many ways eminently practical for the early nineteenth century and much more adaptable to change and to the inclusion of new subjects (like higher mathematics) than earlier historians would have acknowledged. Most important, he notes that the antebellum colleges bequeathed to their land-grant descendants a powerful emphasis on democracy and on the broadening of student access. By the time of the Civil War, there were several hundred viable colleges in the United States, and many had for a long time educated students who were drawn from those classes of society that

Justin Morrill and the architects of the land-grant legislation characterized as the "industrial and agricultural classes." Thus, those of us of presentistic bent who like to find the roots of democratic themes in American higher education solely in the land-grant tradition need to understand more about democracy in the antebellum colleges.

If democratic access forms one of two primary pillars of the land-grant tradition, the other is utilitarianism. Our archetypal thirty-minute speech on land-grant ideas usually includes a rhetorical celebration of the land-grant college as the origin of things useful and utilitarian in American higher education. There is truth embedded in this declaration but again, if we are not to reduce our understanding of land-grant to the most simplistic level, it is good to reflect on the hundred years or so of discussion of the need for "practical" subjects in American colleges that preceded the Morrill Act. For some

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Americans of the late eighteenth century, the inclusion of surveying and navigation was of extreme importance, and the call went out for the colleges to give attention to those subjects. They did. For others, it was the inclusion of higher mathematics, and by the

mid-point of the antebellum period, numerous colleges scattered throughout the land had brought both integral and differential calculus into the curriculum (making it required of all students) as well as a variety of scientific subjects that were within spitting distance of the leading edge of scientific discovery. There were other streams of utilitarianism that fed into what would become the land-grant river. A few colleges experimented (unsuccessfully, by and large) with instruction in practical agriculture. A few others tried to incorporate basic civil engineering into their curricula. Still others tried to include specialized subjects like agricultural chemistry. The embracing of subjects like agricultural chemistry and related studies did not occur because college presidents were driven there by their intellectual curiosity. Those subjects were introduced, I would argue, largely because the colleges were trying to respond to some of the same societal pressures that led to the land-grant act. Anyone who cares to read the inchoate scientific and agricultural journals of the early nineteenth century, will be rewarded by the discovery of an impressive range of articles calling for a better and more utilitarian science for society and the colleges. The themes of utilitarianism coalesced in the land-grant legislation; they were not ideas created by it. Put another way, the Morrill Act was constructed within a context of public and collegiate calls for change; it expressed a public interest in change; it did not create it out of whole cloth.

Some of the relatively unexamined aspects of land-grant history suggest the richness of the subject and the poverty of facile

explanations of it. I am particularly fascinated by the efforts made by some state universities in the 1850s to reconfigure themselves along the lines of modern universities and to reorient their programs of study at the same time. More than one state university during this period undertook a reorganization that would take the breath away from late twentieth century academicians, moving almost overnight from institutions that can best be described as liberal arts colleges into a new framework that emphasized professional and utilitarian subjects. Schools of agriculture, commerce, law, mining and metallurgy, and even engineering popped up in a few of these state institutions in the middle and late 1850s, in most cases, no doubt, without sufficient resources to carry out the plans that had been generated as a result of pressures from an economic elite that saw society modernizing at a clip that required not only applied knowledge but professional knowledge. The Civil War intervened, and these ambitious projects receded until after the war. In the South, they were doomed because of poverty. In the Midwest and North, they succeeded largely because of increasing wealth and prosperity.

The post-Morrill Act history of land-grant colleges is equally fascinating and equally understudied. The standard references provide capsule treatments of such subjects as the introduction of the teaching of mechanic arts, the teaching of agriculture, the importance of manual labor (another inheritance from the antebellum era), and the incorporation of military training. Saluted as "signs of progress" are topics treated usually in a page or two, such as the beginning of research and the beginning of extension. Not until the 1880s, it is argued, did the land-grant idea really begin to "take shape" with the introduction of experiment stations (drawn from German example) and federal legislation to support them. Here, instead of relying upon the older studies, we are wise to turn to more recent books like *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy: Farmers, Agricultural Colleges, and Experiment Stations, 1870-1890* (Marcus 1985), a sophisticated treatment of the subject and the era or, for that matter, Roger Williams' shorter synthesis of the era in his book mentioned above.

It is when we turn the corner into the twentieth century that we run out of useful syntheses of land-grant history. There we find a paucity of good writing that deals with the history of a land-grant concept suddenly surrounded by sets of ideas that are products of Progressive Era reform which emphasize the necessity for universities to "engage" society. Such movements are often associated with institutions that were themselves land-grant colleges; the University of Wisconsin comes to mind as a university where Progressivism and land-grant ideas existed cheek-by-jowl.

Certainly Walter B. Hill, chancellor of the University of Georgia, thought so. It is in his action and rhetoric that we find some sharp examples to illustrate the point. In 1905, Hill had clearly caught the spirit of the two converging phenomena, land-grant and

Progressivism, and in a speech to a Georgia audience he hammered home the theme that "The University of the Twentieth Century will be differentiated from its predecessors in this: it will connect its activities more closely with the business and the life of the people." In a call for the application of university expertise to society's problems, he called upon the academy to attack those problems directly.

Why should not the department of economics take up these subjects? If the professors understand what scientific taxation is, why can not they apply it wisely to prevailing conditions. The wisest teaching of political economy in municipal problems should be given broadcast. The Federal Government maintains in every common-wealth an Experiment Station to find out what is wise in agriculture and to disseminate among the people the knowledge garnered. The departments of sociology and political economy ought to be experiment stations after their kind in the full meaning of the term used by the Federal Government (Dyer 1985).

Hill sought to use the concept of outreach to benefit his own university and to set it on the march toward becoming an institution that emphasized service to the people of the state. To that end, he hit upon an ingenious strategy, persuading nearly one hundred influential Georgians to travel by chartered train to Madison, Wisconsin, to see the university where ideas of outreach, expressed through the "Wisconsin Idea," had taken firmest root. The journey succeeded remarkably and helped to forge legislative consensus for substantially increased appropriations. Back in Georgia, the resourceful Hill (in a fashion that would have warmed the heart of a latter-day strategic planner) instructed his faculty to develop goals and objectives for their departments as part of his overall plan to create an outreach university.

These sorts of illustrations, as useful and entertaining as they may be, do not provide the sweeping kind of synthesis that is required if we are better to understand the outreach university and its land-grant roots. Roger Geiger of the Pennsylvania State University has written a powerful (one is tempted to say "magisterial") two-volume history of the American research university. Building in part upon the work of Laurence Veysey who wrote a sophisticated account of *The Emergence of the American University* in 1965, Geiger blended original with existing research to provide a reliable, analytical, and gracefully written treatment of the research university from 1915 until 1980. It is precisely this sort of book which could be of immense value to an understanding of the much-ignored, much-misunderstood educational practices that collectively comprise the outreach and public service tradition in American higher education. Geiger's work also makes it clear that outreach occurs in many forms. A recently published volume of the

History of Higher Education Annual, edited by Geiger, on the land-grant tradition, offers the hope that talented historians are now turning their talents toward land-grant themes.

History is not panegyric. History is not encomium. And a general history of university outreach in the United States must always consider those currents in society that flow outside and inside the academy. Any history of the American outreach university must not only take into account the legacies of pre-Civil War America but must also consider the ways in which non-academic forces have

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shaped outreach. The celebration of the land-grant tradition must be tempered by cool analysis of topics like the influence of economic forces and corporate America upon the development of the outreach university. Any author who undertakes such a project will want to consider pertinent themes laid out in

scholarship like *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894-1928* (Barrow 1990) which sketches the American university within the context of corporate influence, and literature of a more polemical bent like *Hard Times, Hard Tomatoes* (Hightower 1973), which raises interesting questions about linkages between land-grant universities, colleges of agriculture, and corporate agriculture.

Such an author will also have to consider hard questions pertaining to definition. Defining outreach is no easy task, so she/he will have to take into account the congeries of terms and ideas that define those activities of the university that properly fall into the domain of the third mission. There are brambles here. Is all applied research outreach? Are university clinical activities outreach? Are university profit centers properly thought of as outreach? In the end, however, the person who decides to synthesize the history of the outreach university will have an immensely enjoyable task in coming to understand the extant scholarship, in plowing fields as yet unturned, and in skillfully exploring educational practices abroad that are sources of the outreach tradition. At the conclusion of such a project, well conceived and well executed, we will have a much better opportunity for fruitful retrospection.

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on. 'I do,' Alice hastily replied, 'at least—at least I mean what I say — that's the same thing you know.'" (Carroll 1955)

Problems of definition beset not only historians but also those who till the fields of university outreach and public service. Those "tillers" have spent much energy in search of a single label that will convey a comprehensive sense of those activities which gather under the umbrella term "outreach and public service."

The historical semantics are not entirely clear. The grandmother term was likely "extension," but that word was kidnapped by agricultural forces and is now inextricably tied to the idea of agricultural extension, although we all know that Cooperative Extension is much broader than "agricultural extension." In earlier times, "university extension" was the term of choice. The etymology here leads us to England where Oxford University professors talked about, wrote about, and practiced "university extension" before the American Civil War. "University extension" captures the broadness of "the extended university" concept that runs through the writings of Walter B. Hill and is associated with numerous American universities, perhaps particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. By the way, there is "the extended university" which has partially fallen from usage but which seems to convey quite nicely the notion that universities are programmatically active outside their walls.

Somewhere along the way, "extension" became so powerfully associated with what is now known as Cooperative Extension that land-grant universities in particular began to search for other terms that would define the activity that they (like Alice) understood but had trouble conveying. "Services" had its day, and some remember academic colleagues blissfully unaware of outreach activities who connected "services" with the paving of university parking lots. "Public Service" came into usage and still enjoys wide currency, although those who have worked in the "Public Service" arena will quickly tell you that the term is sometimes confused with "public affairs" or associated with "public policy." "Public Service" has also been used in a variety of institutional contexts to convey quite different meanings. The president of one Ivy League institution employed the term in a particularly flexible way to include private consulting by faculty members. "Land-grant" itself is a term that often implies broader meanings. We speak (as I have done) of the land-grant tradition, the spirit of land-grant, and the land-grant idea. Users associate the term with the land-grant university, but we surely must admit that "land-grant" has limited currency to members of the general public who likely associate the term with what are uncharitably referred to as "cow colleges" (Smiley 1995).

And then there is "professional service." This seems to me to be the least satisfying of all the labels used to describe outreach and

public service, but it has enjoyed a fairly extensive usage in the literature and has had the support of thoughtful students of the field. The general idea is that academicians use their professional skills in service to the non-academic world. This term, however (like several of the others), is imprecise and overlaps with ideas of service to one's discipline or even with consulting.

In very recent times, we have started to speak of the "engaged university" to describe the multifarious ways that institutions of higher learning connect with society. Many are familiar with the phrase "the scholarship of application," coined by the late Ernest Boyer and meant to convey the notion that academicians can apply their skills outside the academy and be recognized and rewarded for doing so.

Salvation (and some clarity) may lie in using the binomial term "public service and outreach." This term has the virtue of linking two related concepts (service and outreach) and of conveying the thought that they occur outside the university, that is, when the noun "university" is placed in front of the phrase.

These semantical diversions, seemingly pedantic, are a serious problem for universities that place a high premium on communicating to society about outreach activities and in gathering diverse university activities under one conceptual umbrella.

There have been numerous attempts to define all of these terms. On the one hand, university service and outreach can be thought of as anything that involves the public in its activities and falls outside the realm of traditional classroom instruction. More frequently adopted are definitions that make it clear that knowledge that comes from scholarly, scientific, and professional disciplines is being applied outside the institution to a wide array of societal concerns and problems. Here are three examples drawn from different contexts.

The first is expansive and casts a very broad net: "Public service and extension is any type of service provided to individuals or groups outside the traditional academic classroom community. In this sense, it includes organized instructional programs (both credit and non credit); advisory services; applied or mission-oriented research; and use of the university libraries, conference facilities, or other resources connected with the academic community." This definition comes from the University of Georgia and draws the outreach boundary at the door of the traditional classroom community, promoting the idea that there are places on the campus where public service occurs and, of course, the widely accepted notion that off-campus service, extension, and outreach are delivered through a variety of organized means. Unspoken in this definition is the nexus between fields of knowledge and organized mechanisms for delivery of that knowledge through outreach. For purposes of promotion and tenure, the same university describes public service and extension as follows: "Service is the integrated application of knowledge through research, teaching, and technical assistance to solve problems confronting an ever-changing and increasingly

complex society. It is principally involved in the identification, development, and rendering of educational and technical services to individuals, communities, organizations, and public agencies. Service activities are basically oriented to the life-related and public-policy needs of society. Problem-centered, rather than subject-centered, service activities rely heavily upon integrating subject matter from many disciplines with experiences in the world of work, adult life, and youth development." Here the emphasis falls upon the problem-centered nature of outreach as opposed to the subject-centered world of the classroom. Whether that distinction is as clear as the definition would imply is debatable, particularly taking into account recent trends that emphasize service learning and long-standing educational practices that place students in a variety of experiences that bring them into systematic contact with the non-academic world.

Recently, in a collection of essays on university-community collaboration, James T. Bonnen of Michigan State University argues for the acceptance of outreach as the definitional coin of the realm and proposes a definition that reflects elements of the previous definitions in an attempt to be clear about the relationship of the university to the external world: "Outreach can be defined as: *The corporate activities of a university, beyond its immediate civic responsibilities which involve conscious commitment by academic units of the university to some role in the problem-solving efforts of society, and which are focused on the developing of human, national, and community resources. It involves a purposive extension or linkage of the university's special competence and resources to organizations and individuals outside the university* [Bonnen's emphases].

If this definition might not be readily understood without considerable reflection by the general citizenry, it has the virtue of emphasizing the corporate, purposive activities of the university as forming the basis for outreach.

Each of these definitions, and numerous others, helps us to clarify a concept of outreach that is important not only to communicating outside the academy but within it as well. Many colleagues within my own university, where there is a powerful emphasis upon outreach, are so detached from the world of outreach and extension that they rarely, if ever, reflect upon the definitional problems that plague the outreach mission.

Others acknowledge land-grant traditions, but only tacitly, as they argue that the academy should forge new links with the public. A recent publication from the Kettering Foundation contains a set of stimulating articles that propound a gulf between the public and the academy. Several of the authors argue persuasively for universities to engage society and to respond to the "needs of public life." Phrases like "public intellectual," "public science," and "public scholarship" populate these articles.

An air of discovery permeates the publication as writers expose gulfs between universities and the public and advocate stronger connections and more powerful outreach — although the emphasis

falls upon "public scholarship" as opposed to outreach. While two authors briefly acknowledge the outreach traditions associated with land-grant universities and medical schools, they relegate those activities to the margins in calling for the establishment of "public spaces" on most American campuses. Although the prospects for university public service and outreach may not be materially affected by confusing argot, there is a great deal of potential for wasting time in the reinvention of wheels and the creation of "new" approaches to outreach that already have historical roots that run deep and are practiced widely throughout American universities. Future prospects for the American outreach university depend upon a better understanding throughout the United States and abroad of the essential nature and variety of outreach activities — but there are also a host of practical considerations cogently expressed in a brief

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article in the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* by James Votruba, formerly of Michigan State University and now president of Northern Kentucky University.

Votruba presents two overall challenges to consider when discussing the outreach university and ten strategies for the extension and application of knowledge.

First, he points out that universities must come to grips with the competitive forces that shape the educational market today — a market replete with "a whole new array of educational providers." A second "challenge of alignment" is definitional. Universities must define their own roles so as to confront the most pressing national issues. Without this involvement, Votruba argues, universities run the risk of losing the support of the sponsoring public.

The ten strategies collectively comprise a crisp overview of the primary challenges that face the outreach university as well as providing guidance for the future. In my judgment, they also give us a good outline for further inquiry into the nature, purpose, and character of the outreach university. The first strategy is central. Votruba cogently discusses the absolute necessity for tying outreach to its intellectual bases within the academy, arguing that the ties should be "seamless" among teaching, research, and service. The second strategy is also critical: the creation of a reward structure for faculty members and institutional units supporting outreach. Partisans of the outreach enterprise would be well-advised to look very closely at this area of concern for it offers considerable potential as an area of inquiry. Although a great deal is written and said anecdotally about the ways in which institutions promote and tenure faculty members, there is little systematic inquiry into how outreach activities are treated within promotional processes.

Plenty of information on this topic exists within individual institutions throughout the United States. We would all benefit from studies that bring together this information, sift it, and interpret it. It

is not enough to assert that outreach is wholly disregarded in the promotional process without a good research base from which to make the assertion.

Votruba's third strategy is to "embed" outreach in academic departments within universities. Here he speaks of implanting outreach within the departments so as to affect, in the long run, the ways in which academicians think about outreach as a worthwhile activity but also how outreach is organized within the university. Others might propose a mixture of organizational structures to include academic departments but also to include other units whose primary focus is outreach — never losing sight of the need for intimate connections to the disciplines upon which their activities are based. For example, many universities have large continuing-education programs that might not find a comfortable (or practical)

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home located within the confines of an academic department.

The fourth and fifth strategies emphasize access to outreach activities through technology and the need for universities to fortify their abilities to cross disciplinary lines and

"organize knowledge around problems." Votruba does not minimize the difficulty of the latter nor that of the sixth strategy which is to "advance the pedagogy of outreach." The seventh strategy calls for faculty who are systematically prepared to engage in outreach. Votruba advocates the establishment of assistantships to prepare graduate students in outreach as well as in teaching and research. Votruba also reminds us of the need to develop and refine assessment tools to measure the impact of outreach, as well as the necessity of situating outreach in visible locations within university administrative structures. Finally, he offers the view that the greatest threat to the outreach university may well be in a dangerous tendency toward hubris and in a concomitant disinclination on the part of institutions of higher learning to look frankly at themselves. Here, Votruba likely means (at least in part) that American outreach universities do not regularly and thoroughly take a clear-eyed view of the ways in which they conduct business and what the impact of that business is.

To understand the outreach mission will require such clear-eyed views and very thorough research as well. Neither with respect to the history of the outreach university nor in the scholarship that pertains to its present status do we have anything approaching clarity or comprehensiveness. What is needed in both areas are syntheses of existing knowledge so that we have a better understanding of the past and a clearer picture of the present. The establishment of the

Journal of Public Service & Outreach augurs well for the future and perhaps might serve as a vehicle for the further discussion of what would comprise a useful research agenda in the area of university outreach. Distinguished national organizations with emphases on outreach could also take the lead. One might wish for a little more emphasis upon knowledge as opposed to practice in the programs of their annual meetings. And finally, the great foundations that have historically underwritten outreach programs worth billions of dollars could well pause and ask whether it might be worthwhile to expend modest sums in stimulating thoughtful research that will tell society and those of us who work in outreach more about ourselves and our enterprise. ■

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