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The Engaged Institution, the Twenty-First Century, and the New University Extension

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Abstract

The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges' Kellogg Commission notes the perception that "despite the resources and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way." This article suggests some organizational patterns and relationships that address the problem, with examples drawn from several major universities. It also presents a vision of how a re-energized, repositioned, comprehensive extension and outreach function can burnish the reputation and performance of an institution committed to fulfilling the promise of engagement.

After the crusading journalist Lincoln Steffans visited the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he proclaimed in a 1909 issue of *The American Magazine:* "In Wisconsin the university is as close to the intelligent farmer as his pig-pen or his tool-house; the university laboratories are part of the alert manufacturer's plant; to the workers, the university is drawing nearer than the school around the corner and is as much his as his union is his or his favorite saloon." Steffans' statement is a colorful articulation of what has become widely known as the Wisconsin Idea—that the borders of the university should be the borders of the state, that the university should make its resources available to citizens wherever they live and work.

A century later, public universities are grappling with how to make this essence of the Wisconsin Idea as strikingly relevant for the nation in the information age as Steffans saw it to be for Wisconsin in the industrial age. At the same time, we are being criticized for our unresponsiveness in the process. The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges' Kellogg Commission describes the situation this way in its report titled "Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution":

> At the root of the criticism is a perception that we are out of touch and out of date. . . . In the end, what these complaints add up to is a perception that, despite the resources

> and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way. *(Kellogg Commission 1999)*

I want to offer here some organizational patterns and possibilities for the university that I believe will address the situation. But first let me suggest that any solution to these negative attitudes must grow out of a new understanding of the engaged institution. That is to say, the engaged institution will be one in which the traditionally third element of higher education's mission—whether it's called extension, outreach, or public service—is valued equally with teaching and research, and integrated with them. Furthermore, I would assert that the distinctive mark of a great public university in the twenty-first century, when campuses no longer hold the exclusive charter for discovery and dissemination of knowledge, will lie in how the institution uses public service to inform its research and inspire its instruction.

Even the most well-intentioned universities, concentrated as they must be upon their campus-based teaching and research, will need all the tools, leverage, and relationships they can muster to realize this vision of engagement. University extension and outreach is one tool at hand in every state to provide the necessary leverage and relationships. I'm thinking here of extension and outreach *broadly* conceived, to include all units charged with serving populations beyond traditional-age, campus-based degree seekers. At the University of Wisconsin, for instance, extension comprises cooperative extension in seventy-two counties, continuing education at all twenty-six of the university's campuses, the state's public broadcasting system, and more. As John Byrne, president emeritus of Oregon State University and executive director of the Kellogg Commission has declared, extension faculty and staff "can and should be the fighter pilots of engagement. Extension can lead the way" *(Waldren 2001)*. Here are three examples of institutions using extension and outreach to lead the way in the era of engagement.

Penn State's Outreach Partnership Fund

The Outreach Partnership Fund at Penn State University provides a one-time-only grant of $2,000 to $5,000 to support collaborative needs assessment, program development, and program delivery projects among Penn State Outreach units, including Cooperative Extension, Distance Education, Public Broadcasting, and Continuing Education offices at the university's twenty-four campus

locations. More than $150,000 has been committed to support forty-five proposals statewide since the fund's inception three years ago. The funded projects further Outreach and Cooperative Extension goals to stimulate inter-unit efforts to expand program audiences, provide new programs, and address newly identified community needs. The Outreach Partnership Fund supports programming in a variety of formats, including conferences, specialized institutes, educational modules, courses developed on-site or using technology, certificate programs, informal education, and many others. It has fostered increased collaboration among different outreach organizations.

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In the three years since the fund was established, outreach partnerships have led to many important outcomes statewide. For example, an intergenerational tutoring program has been created, a children's essay contest on diversity was established with faculty from the College of Agricultural Sciences and Penn State Public Broadcasting, several hands-on information technology, science, and career camps for youth have been offered at county and campus locations, and a forest resources institute for teachers has been delivered at several locations statewide. Rural health initiatives using five different colleges and all outreach units have also been launched through the partnership fund, and a few staff positions shared across units have been established. One of the first projects to receive funding was a pilot Cooperative Extension food safety training partnership that has now grown into a statewide certification program offered in collaboration with all Continuing Education locations.

The Community Learning Centers of Washington State University

Washington State University (WSU) has linked its campuses to the state through the development of ten community-based learning centers. The centers are an outgrowth of WSU Cooperative Extension, with specialized funding and a unique purpose. That purpose is to increase access to higher education—not just to Washington State University—for Washington state residents.

These centers rely not only on their natural connection to Washington State University's campuses, distance degree offerings, and cooperative extension, but also on strong connections with community institutions and agencies, particularly with local community colleges.

The methods used to deliver services for the learning centers are also crucial to their mission. Each combines the "high-tech" delivery methods of distance education with the "high-touch" approach of on-site staff to ensure both quality educational programs and responsive student services.

The goals of the centers are multiple and far-ranging. For example, each is committed to providing access to WSU higher education degrees for place- and time-bound adults through the use of distance education technologies. In meeting this goal, they facilitate delivery of all of WSU's distance degree programs—currently six at the undergraduate level, with others under development. At most centers, two-way video connections provide access to courses that originated at a WSU campus or other state institution. At some centers, selected programs from WSU and other colleges and universities are delivered on-site. In addition, centers make lifelong learning opportunities available to their community in the form of non-credit, certificate, and professional development programs.

Perhaps most uniquely, the learning centers are actively involved in the recruitment of students, not only for distance learning programs, but also for academic programs at WSU's four campuses. Their staffs work as part of a team with campus-based and extension faculty to enhance activities revolving around recruitment of students throughout the area served by the center. Even though these localized recruitment activities are fairly recent, notable results are already in evidence. Enrollment growth in distance programs served by learning centers increased nearly 30 percent from 2000 to 2001, compared with a rate of 20 percent in other areas of the state.

The development of the learning centers was a direct response to economic and social changes throughout the state—changes echoed across the nation. Financial considerations, family obligations, and work requirements are moving people more and more to pursue lifelong learning offered within their community. The average student is older, more likely to be working full- or part-time, often with family responsibilities. Land-grant institutions in other states are recognizing the value of the learning center concept, and similar centers are now in place or in the planning stage in several states, based on the WSU model.

Labor Force Analysis at the University of Wisconsin

This program illustrates how counties, community-based cooperative extension educators, and campus-based faculty specialists can form teams to address workforce development. More than forty-five of Wisconsin's seventy-two counties have had labor force surveys conducted. A UW—Extension specialist, who is also a member of UW—Madison's Department of Rural Sociology, designed the surveys, which have yielded significant new insights into local labor supply and demand issues. Members of Extension's community, natural resources, and economic development faculty in the counties provide local coordination and important follow-through that actively involves government, business, educational institutions, chambers of commerce, and economic development organizations in homegrown strategies to solve workforce problems.

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As a result, using reliable data, communities are able to find a better match between worker and employer needs. Training institutions are better able to adjust programming to get at very specific skill requirements. Employers more fully comprehend the obstacles workers may face in training and job searches—lack of accessible child care and affordable housing, for instance.

This is an example of how the extension network of county faculty and staff links the needs of society to university resources that can help local communities help themselves. Each community has direct input into the nature of the research agenda conducted on its behalf, while the campus faculty member has the opportunity to advance the field of knowledge regarding workforce development. Counties that have cooperated with the university in this labor force analysis project have recognized its high usefulness to them by paying the project fee, about $3,000 in most counties.

What I'll call the New University Extension, capable of mounting the synergistic, value-added programming represented in these three examples, will thrive in institutions that make a conscious decision to deploy their full range of outreach capacities as part of a core engagement strategy. In such environments, the New Extension will:

- serve as a venue for a variety of faculty to undertake "the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and dissemination," as Ernest Boyer *(1990) put* it, demonstrating that community-related work can lead to new knowledge and applications in a range of academic disciplines. Extension can thus help propel the broadening of criteria for promotion and tenure that has begun at institutions across the country.
- become a point of university first contact with a variety of new audiences in an era of rapidly increasing diversity in the American population, drawing both sides into a genuine two-way interactive exchange of expertise and needs.
- build on the hands-on, high-tech tradition of university extension to combine the most sophisticated use of information technology with the commitment and understanding of local campus and county extension faculty and staff.
- constitute a living laboratory for the engaged university, enriching the university's capacities in applied research while hosting greater numbers of students interested in community-based service-learning and student research opportunities.
- serve as one of the twenty-first century university's premier friend- and fund-raisers, making a strong case for the practical value of the university and burnishing its reputation in the eyes of its funders and stakeholders, including governors, state legislators, policymakers, local government officials, the private and nonprofit sectors, and the public at large.
- assist in shaping the university's research agenda, relying on close ties to county government, regional campuses, and local communities to complement and counterbalance the interests of the federal government and private funders. The New Extension will thereby address the concern that land-grant and other public universities may become more beholden to private dollars and the narrow priorities they sometimes champion.
- provide another vehicle to broaden the discussion of outcomes in higher education beyond what its graduates know and are able to do, to embrace also the university's significant impacts on a plethora of other features of our commonweal.

So, what do university leaders need to do to implement this vision? I'll mention three key steps:

1. Make sure that *all* of an institution's extension and outreach units are organized and led so that they can be systematically

directed in the service of the in*stitution's en*gagement objectives. In too many colleges and universities, these units are separate fiefdoms seeking their own glory and revenue streams.

2. Develop the institution's engagement agenda by listening carefully to voices from the community, regional, and state levels expressing their needs. Then determine which needs are appropriate for the university to address and which are not, and devote significant human and fiscal resources to the former.
3. Encourage faculty bodies with decision-making power over tenure and promotion to recognize the value of the scholarship of outreach and public service for the disciplines and the profession at large.

In his book, *Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century: Renegotiating or Abandoning a Social Contract,* George McDowell writes:

> From their beginnings, in the values of American democracy, the land-grant institutions were to be better than the elite institutions and were to make the democracy itself better, in part on the basis of whom they admitted to their classrooms. Now they must achieve their greatness on the basis of how much of the university is engaged with America and with whom they engage. *(198)*

How much and with whom? The answers to these questions—and the future greatness of our land-grants and other public universities—will depend in no small part on re-energized, repositioned, comprehensive extension and outreach services whose institutions empower them to become their engines of engagement.

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