

Commentary: Outreach, Engagement, and the Changing Culture of the University—1998

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The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities identified engagement as an area in which universities should take charge of change. The year was 1996. By 1998, when this article was published, engagement with society as defined by the Kellogg Commission was developing at only a few universities. The Kellogg Commission (1999) report on engagement, *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, had not yet been published.

My article was a call to modify the culture of universities so that effective engagement with society might take place. The article starts with a question to Lou Gerstner, who was attempting to change the culture at IBM: “How do you change a culture, Lou?” He shrugged and said, “It helps to have a crisis.” Behind the question was the implication that in order to do something new, something different, the culture must change. The question also implied that existing cultures could be impediments to new action. Lou’s answer suggested that changing a culture is difficult when times are normal.

Now, almost 20 years after my article was written, engagement is an important function of many universities. Those universities have changed as a result. To be effective partners with community organizations and bring positive changes to society, universities have reorganized their upper administrations to include senior officers for outreach and engagement. Promotion and tenure guidelines now validate the scholarship of engagement (which Ernest Boyer [1990] called the scholarship of application). New scholarly journals devoted to engagement and to the scholarship of engagement have been created. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has created a new classification for universities to aspire to, the Community Engaged Classification and to date, more than 350 universities have been selected to receive this classification. The introduction of *engagement with society*, now an important function of the modern university, has stimulated changes in university missions, processes, and administrative structures. University cultures have changed as a result, and no doubt will continue to change.

Campus cultures evolve as new functions are added. Land-grant colleges created by the federal Morrill Act of 1862 had simple missions: “to teach such branches of learning... to promote the liberal and practical education.” The campus cultures of those colleges changed in the 1880s with the formal addition of research to their mission. A quarter of a century later, college missions changed again with the addition of extension as a public service. As part of their culture, faculty members were expected to *teach*, perform *research*, and provide *service*. Promotion and tenure guidelines were changed to include all three activities. Agricultural research and then extension were recognized and formalized through federal legislation, the Hatch Act in 1887 and the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, well after both research and extension were practiced by colleges. As yet, we haven’t seen engagement recognized by the passage of a federal law, but engagement could follow the path taken by agricultural research and extension.

What is the future of engagement? Are there indications now of what engagement might be, what it can be? It has already been demonstrated that engagement can address virtually any problem facing society. During the recent past, universities have partnered with citizens and organizations to tackle all sorts of problems facing those communities. Working as equal partners with local organizations, universities bring their expertise to address community educational, medical, environmental, academic, and infra-structural problems and needs. Although most programs address American domestic needs, some universities have reached out to communities in African nations, such as Kenya, to help with their needs, adding an international or global dimension to engagement.

Engagement is a learning process for those who participate. The social interactions between university and community members that are inherent in engagement can be exceedingly rich learning experiences, especially for students. University students, both undergraduate and graduate, should be involved. Questions facing the faculty may pertain to the recognition of student involvement in engagement. Academic credits? Perhaps. If so, how many and how will student involvement be evaluated? Those are questions for the academicians. Engagement provides opportunities for all to learn together in the solution of real problems.

Engagement is a democratic process. It is based on important values: *integrity*, *trust*, *respect*, *accountability*, and *sharing*, all values of the university. Engagement won’t work without these as its fundamental values. The values are all interrelated. Integrity includes honesty and truth, values associated with adherence

to facts, completeness, and reality. Accountability applies to an openness of investigation based on the confidence that honesty, integrity, and truth have been the basis of action. Respect and trust are associated and are based on the perception that others adhere to the values of honesty, integrity, and truth. Respect and trust are earned. Sharing applies to resources, information, and knowledge and goes both ways, university to community and community to university. Sharing also applies to the basic values essential to engagement. Without adherence to these values, engagement will not be successful. Because engagement relates the university directly to society, it extends the university's values to society and can aid the university in adjusting its own values to complement the values of society.

During the past quarter of a century, engagement has become an integral part of the mission of the modern university. In the future, it will be even more so. In responding to the needs of a rapidly changing society, locally and globally, engagement will become increasingly important to the integration of higher education with the society it serves. As this happens, the culture of the university will change. Lou Gerstner was only partly right when he said, "To change a culture, it helps to have a crisis." He didn't go far enough. In every crisis, there can be opportunity. By partnering with communities to solve their problems, engagement can help universities see those opportunities.

References

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About the Author

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