

HOUSTON CHRONICLE



May 11, 2018

“Universities Must Engage Society”

By Rick Cherwitz



Public research universities face enormous challenges in the 21st century, perhaps none more significant than the obligation of universities to serve society.

Why? Alumni, businesses, government and parents now believe that engagement with society should be directly reflected in the curriculum and influence how students are educated—an understandable demand given rising tuition and increased worries that college is not producing satisfactory career outcomes.

Engaging universities with society is not a platitude or another task. Engagement is the sine qua non of research universities, the essence of our mission to transform lives for the benefit of society. To discharge this duty in an ever-changing world requires rethinking "service," finding innovative ways to harness and integrate the vast intellectual resources of academe as a lever for social good.

Service must not be pegged as a university's third function, taking a back seat to and competing with research and teaching. Service should be portrayed as

academic engagement, where collaboration and partnership with the community produce solutions to society's most vexing problems. Service -- the desire to make a difference -- is the ethical imperative driving research and teaching as well as a principal product of these enterprises.

While public research universities are beginning to experiment with methods for taking service seriously, as evidenced by the University of Texas' nationally acclaimed Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) initiative in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE), the concept of "citizen-scholarship" is an unrealized dream.

At best, we have a glimpse of academic engagement -- of what universities could become if academics are willing to risk change, pledging to educate "leaders" in the broadest sense of that term. The dream of academic engagement must now become a reality: an obligation, not a choice.

It requires vigorous debate about what an academic culture should value, as well as how educational institutions are organized and administered -- perhaps even changing how faculty members are rewarded and compensated. Although essential to the identity and mission of research institutions, what is produced and taught by academic departments and disciplines in isolation is not our only valuable commodity.

A university's collective knowledge may be its most precious asset -- one anchored to, but not in competition with, basic research and disciplinary knowledge.

Thinking across disciplines and developing centralized mechanisms for accessing and integrating intellectual capital is a sizable hurdle. Yet academic engagement cannot be accomplished operating as a loose confederacy of academic and administrative units, where duplication of effort, wasted resources, ignorance of others' work and a lack of synergy are the order of the day.

Educational leaders must be imaginative and bold, willing -- even if initially unpopular -- to question academic and administrative geography. After all, much of academe's current organization is a holdover from prior centuries that no longer meets the needs of a quickly changing knowledge industry.

Undergraduate majors and the generation of new knowledge are cases in point. Most of an institution's knowledge is discovered and delivered by academic departments and narrowly defined disciplines. Although these units are our professional lifeblood and therefore must be preserved, they may not always provide the best vehicles for creating and transmitting relevant knowledge.

"Add-ons" (undergraduate minors and concentrations, internships, elective courses, service programs) and other "extra" opportunities cannot solve the larger, structural problem. These additives compete for time and energy, failing to address the fundamental question of how knowledge is optimally organized, integrated, conveyed and put to work.

Imagine a university in which undergraduate majors and research programs are not equated with or constrained by departmental boundaries, but are defined by the questions asked and the knowledge and outcomes desired. In such a university, new knowledge and innovative educational experiences would not be supplements to fix a broken system -- just as new tax regulations aren't the corrective to the convoluted IRS structure. Rather, they would replace status quo methods of delivery, encouraging real cross-disciplinary and experiential learning of value to students and society.

Society's complex problems cannot be solved by any one academic discipline or sector. Answers demand intellectual entrepreneurship -- an approach to service that fosters collaboration among educational institutions, nonprofit agencies, businesses and government. This is far different than the customary unilateral, elitist sense of the term service in which universities contribute to society in a top-down manner.

It's time for genuine academic engagement -- service "with" and not "to" society, where service constitutes more than the third (often undefined and less accountable) function of the university.

A good example of this reimagined notion of service is Arizona State University's (ASU) "New American University" —implemented by ASU President Michael Crow as the model for the operation of his institution. Crow noted, "The concept of the 'citizen-scholar' that the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program advances resonates with our own culture of academic enterprise. The correlations between the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Consortium at the University of Texas at

Austin and our own institutional cultural of academic enterprise at Arizona State University are obvious.”

Invigorating and reshaping the connection between academe and society could provide answers to the daunting fiscal and social challenges confronting universities.

Public research universities such as UT are positioned to lead the way with bold and visionary measures. Taking the admonition for engagement seriously, we can devise collaborative methods for integrating universities' massive intellectual capital with the resources of the community.

If we rise to this occasion, our legacy will be profound indeed.

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