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It's time for genuine academic engagement

By Rick Cherwitz



Maxwell Svetlik, right, watches as Professor Jivko Sinapov demonstrates a robot in the artificial intelligence lab at the University of Texas in 2016.

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 reflected in the curriculum and influence how students are

educated—understandable given rising tuition and worries that college is not producing satisfactory career outcomes.

Engaging universities with society is not a platitude. For research universities, engagement is the essence of our mission to transform lives for the benefit of society. In an ever-changing world, engagement requires rethinking “service,” finding innovative ways to integrate the vast intellectual resources of academe as a lever for social good.

Service must not be pegged as a university’s third function, competing with research and teaching. Service should be portrayed as academic engagement, where collaboration with the community produces solutions to society’s most vexing problems. Service — the desire to make a difference — drives research and teaching and is 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, the concept of “citizen-scholarship” is an unrealized dream.

At best, we have a glimpse 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 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 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.

Thinking across disciplines and developing centralized mechanisms for 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 to question academic and administrative geography.

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 must be preserved, they may not always provide the best vehicles for creating and transmitting 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 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. Rather, they would replace the status quo, 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.

It's time for genuine academic engagement — service “with” and not “to” society,.

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 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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