

Viewpoint: The Challenge of Creating Engaged Public Research Universities

How to harness the vast intellectual assets of universities as a lever for social good?

by Rick Cherwitz

Several years ago, Michael Burawoy (former president of the American Sociological Association and a University of California, Berkeley professor), in a response to a New York Times op-ed by Stanley Fish, declared: “Academics are living in a fool’s paradise if they think they can hold on to their ivory tower” (Burawoy 2004, p. B24). He continued, “The chickens are coming home to roost as the public is no longer interested in our truth, no longer prepared to subsidize our academic pursuits. ... Fish would have us draw the curtains, close our eyes, and either accede to privatization or hope that the passion for the market will evaporate. It won’t. We have to demonstrate our public worth” (Burawoy 2004, p. B24).

Burawoy’s challenge to engage in public life has never been more urgent. Witness recent protests on college campuses across the country—clearly, there is a crisis in higher education. With skyrocketing tuition, shrinking access to and budgets for public universities, and increasingly complex social problems, it is time to ask: What are public research institutions doing—and what should they do—to fulfill their compact with the citizens of their states?

One approach is found in the example of The University of Texas at Austin’s (UT-Austin) intellectual entrepreneurship

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(IE) initiative. Part of the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement headed by vice president Gregory Vincent, a presidential portfolio created by president William Powers Jr. to foster “dynamic community-university partnerships designed to transform lives,” IE seeks to educate “citizen-scholars”—students supplying more than narrow disciplinary knowledge (The University of Texas at Austin 2008, ¶ 1).

Whether participating in cross-disciplinary, multi-institutional teams to find solutions to overcrowded emergency rooms (“synergy groups”), working with mentors on- and off-campus to address the problem of child abuse (“pre-grad internships”), developing an arts-based community newspaper and implementing arts educational programs that place at-risk urban youth on the path to college (“arts entrepreneurship incubator”), or using the scholarly methodology of oral history to implement programs for increasing diversity and promoting culturally-sensitive communication in local schools (“project in interpreting the Texas past”), these IE students and projects concretely exemplify academic engagement. They take to heart the ethical obligation to discover and put to work knowledge that makes a difference—engaging in service with, rather than to, society.

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Moreover, IE students reveal how local, national, and global problems are complex and cannot be solved by any one academic discipline or sector of society. Answers demand intellectual entrepreneurship—an approach to service that fosters collaboration among educational institutions, nonprofit agencies, businesses, and government. This is far different from the customary unilateral, elitist sense of the term “service” in which universities contribute to society in a top-down manner.

To be clear, these student examples are powerful illustrations of the potential of academic engagement. Yet serious challenges remain. Several UT-Austin faculty (a poet, economist, philosopher, neurobiologist, theatre historian, and geologist), along with distinguished community members (including the U.S. secretary of commerce, CEO of a major health care network, chancellor of the University of Texas System, and president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation), contributed to an IE

newspaper series exploring how to engender greater connections between the university and community (The University of Texas at Austin 2003–2004).

What emerged was the conclusion that the quest to create engaged public research universities—to fully realize the ethical imperative to make a difference—requires academe to confront a stark reality: inflexible administrative structures, historically embedded practices, status-quo thinking, and inertia. Until these obstacles are overcome, the retreat from public life will not be arrested.

Consider a sample of the challenges confronting citizen-scholars:

- How do scholars, who live primarily in a world of ideas, develop the rhetorical skills needed to incubate and sustain projects requiring fiscal and intellectual investment by stakeholders inside and outside the university—skills typically disassociated from the scholarly enterprise?
- How can faculty integrate, synthesize, and unify knowledge to permit solutions to complex social, civic, and ethical problems? This is an enormous challenge in an academic culture that former Brown University president and Carnegie Corporation president Vartan Gregorian (2004, p. B12) says “respects specialists and suspects generalists.” How do we ensure the continued proliferation of specialized knowledge, while concurrently encouraging renaissance thinking?
- How can faculty who engage in public scholarship flourish, given traditional performance assessment? Incentive systems not only fail to encourage public scholarship but may actually devalue research that simultaneously contributes to society. What changes to institutional reward structures are requisite for academic engagement?
- How can faculty maintain standards of academic integrity and objectivity while participating in community projects in which they may become ideologically vested or serve as change agents?
- How should academic institutions recalibrate methods for creating and delivering knowledge? Because historically original thought, lone discovery, and disciplinary contribution are considered more important than team work, what changes are needed to address problems requiring multi-institutional, cross-disciplinary, and collaborative forms of investigation?
- How can academic engagement be achieved in an environment maintaining that research is two-dimensional,

either “basic” or “applied”—a long-held, rigid dichotomy frequently invoked to deter faculty from venturing too far from theoretical knowledge?

- How might the entrepreneurial thinking that universities successfully deploy for technology transfer analogously be used to empower all of the arts and sciences—to unleash a university-wide spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship while respecting the sanctity of the academic enterprise?
- How can the university better apply its morally centered quest for truth to matters of public concern? How can it encourage public deliberation that benefits from many opinions about and challenges to received wisdom without being perceived as relativistic or unpatriotic?

Although diagnosis of the problem is a first step, faculty, administrators, and campus leaders have yet to discern fully how to make the change-resistant academy more responsive to the needs of society. It is time to reflect on how to harness the vast intellectual assets of universities as a lever for social good. Fashioning genuine university-community synergies must move beyond platitudes, becoming part of the day-to-day routines of universities.

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I raise these issues not because they immediately or easily can be answered but because their articulation itself may be controversial, requiring careful debate and discussion. If we can agree that these or other questions accurately capture the challenges confronting citizen-scholars, then we are one step closer to realizing genuine academic engagement.

Nevertheless, let me at least offer a few examples of what might be done to address several of these challenges. First, public research universities should begin to deliver transdisciplinary, graduate-level courses on topics such as innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership, ethics, and communication. When institutions like UT-Austin and the University of Washington experimented with this type of curriculum in their graduate schools, it was discovered that these courses equip graduate students with the necessary knowledge and skills not only to successfully develop and sustain their research but also to put their projects to work for the benefit of society.

Second, we must seriously revisit the issue of faculty assessment and tenure and promotion, much as the Ohio State University president E. Gordon Gee and Syracuse University chancellor Nancy Cantor are doing on their campuses. This should include a discussion of whether the three-pronged approach to faculty contribution (research, teaching, service) makes sense. Not only may these no longer be discrete categories, but perhaps the time has also come to recognize the vital role played by service (engagement) in scholarship. As I have argued elsewhere, universities should experiment with the concept of a “scholarly contract” (not in the legal sense) (Cherwitz and Hartelius 2006). When they are hired and at regular intervals during their careers, faculty should be given opportunities to define and redefine their scholarly objectives and work products—to negotiate how one’s scholarship fits the mission of an institution and an academic department and what person-specific, rigorous assessment metrics for evaluation subsequently might be agreed upon.

Third, in an effort to integrate knowledge, engage the community, and recalibrate methods for discovering and transmitting knowledge, universities should offer “action seminars”—team-based collaborations among faculty and students from multiple disciplines and stakeholders from the public and private sectors. Action seminars would not start with academic disciplines and particular bodies of knowledge but would instead focus on specific problems facing society (e.g., the environment, technology, health care, housing, transportation, education, multicultural diversity), seeking to produce synergies: a whole that is more powerful than the sum of the parts. Outcomes of action seminars could include public policy proposals, corporate strategies and partnerships, funded and published research, new ways of discovering and communicating knowledge, and the spin-off of “communities of practice” (groups and structures for continuing and sustaining the work). In addition to UT-Austin’s “synergy group” project, other recent examples of this approach that move us beyond the traditional service-learning model include Syracuse University’s “enitiative” (a campus-community entrepreneurship program), Arizona State University’s faculty and student initiatives aimed at realizing president Michael Crow’s vision for the “new American university,” and Claremont Graduate University’s “transdisciplinary” courses.

Fourth, universities should deliver “academic-community mentorships” to freshmen and sophomores. Undergraduates would work with graduate student mentors in academic

disciplines potentially of interest and with community liaisons inside their proposed majors, finding important connections between academic fields and their career aspirations. These mentorships might reduce time-to-degree by allowing students to thoughtfully pick an academic major and devise a program of study and would also help make seamless connections between academic disciplines and the problems facing society—thus debunking the rigid dichotomy between theory and application. An academic-community mentorship program will be piloted at UT-Austin in 2010–2011. While not entirely the same, the University of Virginia’s “Jefferson public citizens program” illustrates how community engagement can be integrated into students’ academic plans of study.

Whether these or other answers are offered, addressing the challenges to creating engaged universities must not be a platform for disgruntled faculty—something that, as we saw in the debates of prior decades about teaching versus research, will make it far too easy for critics to dismiss the call for engaged research as the diatribe of failed scholars who would have us dilute or abandon the research mission of universities.

Instead this cause requires prominent scholars—those with the academic ethos to be heard—to join the conversation. While understanding the distinctive mission of research institutions, these distinguished faculty also recognize the need to build connections between the university and community. Moreover, they refuse to apologize for being scholars. Through example, they concretely illustrate how “research” (thought and reflection) and “engagement” (action) are not inherently an either/or; each propels and contributes to the other.

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Academic engagement is laudable in its own right and therefore ought to be pursued by faculty and students and vigorously facilitated and supported by administrators. Yet there may be a more practical and urgent reason for academics to engage their communities: if, for example, we expect the public—legislators, students, parents—to pay higher education’s increasing sticker price, then building additional relevant connections between academe and society is a must. As former UT-Austin president Larry

Faulkner (2003, ¶ 63) bluntly put it, “the antidote to irrelevance is engagement of the university with the real needs and aspirations of the supporting society.”

Perhaps one day “I know therefore I must act” may be a key part of the scholarly mindset. Who knows? It might become our academic brand, designating public research universities as truly innovative and exemplary sites of learning in this century.

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