

GRADUATE STUDIES A Call for Academic and Civic Engagement

by Rick Cherwitz

State universities like Texas face enormous challenges in the 21st century, including



waning fiscal support, unhealthy student-faculty ratios, and the persistent demand for greater access and diversity. Perhaps no challenge is more compelling, though, than the obligation of universities to provide service to society. As UT president Larry Faulkner observed in his September address on the state of the University, "The antidote to irrelevance is engagement of the University with the real needs and aspirations of the supporting society."

Engaging the University with society is neither a platitude nor another task to be accomplished. 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 radically rethinking "service," finding innovative ways to harness

and integrate the vast intellectual resources of the University as a lever for social good. Service is not just volunteerism. It mustn't be pegged as the University's third function, taking a back seat to and competing with research and teaching. Service should be portrayed as academic and civic 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 UT is experimenting with new methods for engaging society, as evidenced by the graduate school's nationally acclaimed Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program, the concept of "citizen-scholarship" remains an unrealized dream. At best, we have a glimpse of academic and civic engagement — of what universities could become if academics are willing to risk change, pledging to educate "leaders" in the broadest sense of that term.

What will it take to make this happen, to bring President Faulkner's goal of engagement to fruition? 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 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. The 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 sizeable hurdle. Yet academic and civic 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, which 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 the institution's knowledge is discovered and delivered by academic departments and narrowly defined disciplines. While these units are our professional lifeblood and must therefore be preserved, they may not always provide the best vehicles for creating

and transmitting relevant knowledge.

"Add-ons" (e.g., 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 an already convoluted IRS structure. Rather, they would replace status quo methods of delivery, encouraging real interdisciplinary 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 fostering collaboration among educational institutions, non-profit 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. It's time for genuine academic and civic engagement, service "with" not "to" society, where service moves beyond volunteerism, constituting more than the third — often undefined and less accountable — function of the University.

Invigorating and reshaping the connection between academe and society could provide answers to the daunting fiscal and social challenges confronting universities. UT is positioned to lead the way with bold and visionary measures. Taking Faulkner's admonition for engagement seriously, we can devise collaborative, synergistic methods for integrating universities' massive intellectual capital with the resources of the community. If we rise to this occasion, UT's legacy will be profound indeed. —Rick Cherwitz is professor in communication studies and the division of rhetoric and composition and founder of UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program, recently renamed Professional Development and Community Engagement. (www.utexas.edu/ogs/development.html)