



Viewpoints, Outlook

Building connections between universities and society

By RICK CHERWITZ

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University of California professor Michael Burawoy declared five years ago: "Academics are living in a fool's paradise if they think they can hold on to their ivory tower. The public is no longer prepared to subsidize our academic pursuits. We have to demonstrate our public worth."

Burawoy's challenge has never been more urgent. With skyrocketing tuition, shrinking budgets and mounting assaults on the research mission of universities, we must ask: What are public institutions doing — and what should they do - to fulfill their compact with the citizens of their states?

One example is The University of Texas at Austin's Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE) in the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, a 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.

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"), implementing arts educational programs that place at-risk urban youth on the path to college ("arts entrepreneurship incubator"), using oral histories to promote culturally sensitive communication in schools ("project in interpreting the Texas past") or partnering with a local organization to provide academic and community mentors empowering middle and high school students to discover their passion and build portfolios that open a pathway to college ("it could be u"), these IE initiatives exemplify academic engagement. They take to heart the ethical obligation to discover and put to work knowledge that makes a difference.

Yet challenges remain. Several UT faculty (a poet, economist, philosopher, neurobiologist, theatre historian and geologist), along with distinguished community members (including the University of Texas system's chancellor), contributed to a newspaper series exploring how better to connect the university and community. Their conclusion: Creating engaged public research universities requires academe to confront inflexible administrative structures, historically embedded practices, status-quo thinking and inertia.

What are the challenges?

* How do scholars, who live primarily in a world of ideas, develop the rhetorical skills needed to sustain projects requiring investment by stakeholders inside and outside the university - skills typically disassociated from the scholarly enterprise?

* How can faculty integrate knowledge, permitting solutions to complex social and civic problems? This is an enormous challenge in an academic culture respecting specialists and suspecting generalists. How do we protect specialized knowledge, while concurrently encouraging renaissance thinking?

* How can faculty who engage in public scholarship flourish, given traditional performance assessment? 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 original thought and disciplinary contribution are considered more important than team work, what changes are needed to address problems requiring cross-disciplinary and collaborative forms of investigation?

* How can academic engagement occur in an environment maintaining that research is two dimensional: 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 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?

* How can the university better apply its morally centered quest for truth to matters of public concern? How can it encourage genuine public deliberation without being perceived as relativistic or unpatriotic?

Whatever the answers, creating engaged universities must not be a platform for disgruntled faculty or external groups motivated by political agendas - something making it easy for critics to dismiss the call for engaged research as the diatribe of failed scholars or those without adequate understanding of academics merely wishing to dilute the research mission of universities.

Academic engagement is laudable in its own right. Yet there are practical and urgent reasons for academics to engage their communities: If we expect the public - legislators, students, parents - to pay higher education's increasing sticker price, building additional relevant connections between academe and society is a must.

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