A New Social Compact Demands Real Change

Connecting the University to the Community

by Richard A. Cherwitz

Academics are living in a fool's paradise if they think they can hold on to their ivory tower, fashioned for another era, another world. For too long too many of us have been hiding behind academic freedom and university autonomy—all in the name of truth. But 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....We have to demonstrate our public worth.

—Michael Burawoy, president of the American Sociological Association, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 13, 2004

Public research universities face enormous challenges in the 21st century: waning fiscal support, a loss of public confidence, and a persistent lack of diversity. Perhaps no challenge is more compelling, however, than the obligation to serve society. The time has come for increased commitment to and removal of barriers preventing socially relevant research and learning and the crossdisciplinary and collaborative forms of investigation that complex social issues demand.

Unfortunately, too often service is portrayed exclusively as "volunteerism," and interdisciplinary scholarship is viewed as less rigorous than, and at odds with, disciplinary knowledge. So conceived, service is destined to take a back seat to research and teaching, and interdisciplinary ways of arranging and delivering knowledge at best become add-ons that compete for time and money with the flawed disciplinary approaches we have inherited. The result is a lost opportunity for "academic engagement"—collaboration across disciplines and partnerships with the community that might produce solutions to society's most vexing problems.

Pursuing academic engagement necessitates radically rethinking "service" and "knowledge" and finding innovative ways to organize in order to leverage academe's intellectual capital for the benefit of society. It requires us to acknowledge that a university's collective wisdom is anchored to, but is not in competition with, basic research and disciplinary knowledge—and that the significance of such wisdom partially resides in its use.

Following our usual instinct to create "products"—additional programs, courses, and infrastructure—to meet this most recent challenge will only compound the current problem. Academic engagement demands nothing less than rethinking disciplinary geography, institutional reward systems, and the organizational "processes" we use to effect change.

While redefining and implementing more robust notions of service and knowledge will be arduous, the payoff could be enormous. With rising tuition, limited access to the nation's best universities, and increasingly complex social problems, the need for public institutions to fulfill their compact with the citizens of their states is more important than ever.

At my own institution, the University of Texas at Austin, a critical mass of faculty are citizen-scholars who exemplify academic engagement—taking to heart the ethical obligation to contribute to society with more than narrow, theoretical, disciplinary knowledge. Among them are a philosopher helping to increase the role played by ethics in corporate decisionmaking, a neurobiologist and pharmacologist struggling to bring personal behavior and public policies in line with what is known about alcohol addiction, a theatre historian attempting to use performance as a mechanism through which ordinary people can change their lives, and a literary scholar who uses poetry to enable those in business and government to imagine what is possible.

In 2004-2005 these and several other faculty, along with distinguished members of the community—including the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, the chancellor of the University of Texas System, the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and the executive vice president of a major health-care network—contributed to a series in the local newspaper exploring how to connect the university and community in order to address society's most challenging problems—what Larry Faulkner, president of the University of Texas, Austin, calls the "new social compact."

Standing in the way of realizing the ethical imperative to make

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a difference, however, are inflexible administrative structures, historically embedded practices, status quo thinking, and inertia. Until these obstacles are overcome, the retreat from public life will continue and the new social compact will not be realized.

Among the other challenges confronting universities aspiring to academic engagement are these:

• How do scholars, who live primarily in a world of ideas, acquire the practical tools—for example, rhetorical, business, design, and technological skills—needed to incubate and sustain projects requiring fiscal and intellectual investment from both inside and outside the university—skills typically not associated with the scholarly enterprise?

• How can faculty integrate, synthesize, and unify knowledge to permit the solution of complex social, civic, and ethical problems? This is an enormous challenge in an academic culture that former Brown University President Vartan Gregorian says "respects specialists and suspects generalists."

• How can faculty who engage in public scholarship flourish, given the measures for assessing performance enforced by universities and academic disciplines, such as relying primarily on the number of publications tailored to small, insular audiences? Reward systems not only fail to encourage public scholarship and interdisciplinary projects but may actually discourage research that doesn't fit neatly into a disciplinary framework. 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, or from which they may directly profit?

• How should academic institutions—in which original thought, lone discovery, and disciplinary contribution have been considered more important than teamwork—recalibrate methods for creating and delivering knowledge that addresses the problems of a rapidly changing world?

• How can academic engagement be achieved in an environment in which research is considered either "basic" or "applied"—a somewhat artificial 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 be used to unleash a university-wide spirit of socially useful intellectual entrepreneurship? How might this agenda be pursued while remaining vigilant about the disinterestedness of the academic enterprise?

• How can the university encourage public deliberation that benefits from many different opinions and challenges to received wisdom without being perceived as relativistic or unpatriotic?

Implicit within these challenges is perhaps a more fundamental issue regarding the attitudes and practices of higher education: How can universities transcend top-down, seemingly elitist approaches to learning and discovery—approaches manifested in both our methods and language? While universities have worked hard lately to provide increased access to the services and products of their institutions, they persist in talking about "accepting" and "inviting" the community "to come" and learn "from" those owning knowledge—namely, the faculty. Similarly, faculty "impart," "sell," and "transfer" knowledge to the public and private sectors.

While scholarly expertise is vital, also essential is the expertise gained from experiences and commitment to real-world issues and problems. Hence, if the desired outcome is rigorous and useful knowledge, then universities should modify the methods and metaphors of their enterprise. We must create room for those outside academe not just to sit at our table and "receive" but to share in the discovery and delivery of knowledge.

Addressing these issues will not be easy. University presidents and community stakeholders must encourage faculty to begin a rigorous and thoughtful conversation about how to make the academy—a culture that far too often resists change—more responsive to the needs of society, as well as about how to harness the intellectual assets of universities as a lever for social good. It is time to determine what it will take for academics to collaborate with those in the public and private sectors in producing, jointly owning, and using knowledge to transform people's lives and improve the human condition.

This quest to build a new social compact must not become a platform for disgruntled faculty—something that, as we saw in the debates of prior decades about teaching and research, will make it far too easy for the nay-sayers to dismiss the call for engaged research as the diatribe of failed scholars who would have us abandon the research missions of universities. Instead, this topic should be pursued vigorously by our institutions' most prominent researchers who, while understanding the distinctive mission of academic institutions, also recognize the need to build connections across disciplines and between the university and the community.

Public intellectual practice doesn't inherently require us to choose between research and service or between disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge. Through collaboration among ourselves and with the community, we can make academic engagement more the rule than the exception. This is how our institutions will become innovative and exemplary sites of learning in this century. ▣

RESOURCES

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