Getting Scholars Engaged in Community
by Rick Cherwitz

There is a movement afoot at the University of Texas and other public research institutions across the nation — a movement to bring higher education out of the 19th into the 21st century. With rising tuition, limited access to the University, and increasingly complex social problems, the need for public institutions to fulfill their compact with the citizens of the state is more important than ever.

There is a critical mass of UT faculty who take this compact seriously, viewing themselves as citizen-scholars — researchers supplying more than narrow, theoretical disciplinary knowledge. They exemplify “academic engagement,” taking to heart the ethical obligation to contribute to society, to discover and put to work knowledge that makes a difference.

Too often, though, inflexible administrative structures, historically embedded practices, status quo thinking, and inertia inhibit full realization of this ethical imperative.

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

• How do scholars, who live primarily in a world of ideas, develop the rhetorical skills needed to incite 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 members integrate, synthesize, and unify knowledge to permit 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 do we ensure the continued proliferation of specialized knowledge, while concurrently encouraging renaissance thinking?
• How can faculty members who engage in public scholarship flourish given restricted measurement for assessing performance enforced by universities and academic disciplines? 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 members 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 contributions are considered more important than teamwork, what changes are needed to effectively 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 the arts and sciences — to unleash a University-wide spirit of intellectual entrepreneurship? How might this agenda be pursued while remaining vigilant to 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 different opinions and challenges to received wisdom, without being perceived as relativistic or unpatriotic?

These are but a few challenges to citizen-scholars. Believing that awareness and diagnosis of the problem is the first step to solution, this issue of The Alcalde begins a conversation about how to make the academy — a culture that far too often resists change — more responsive to the needs of society.

Some of UT’s eminent scholars — including a poet, philosopher, neurobiologist, economist, theater historian, pharmacologist, and geologist — weigh in on this issue. They reflect on what must be done to harness the vast intellectual assets of the University as a lever for social good — about what it will take to fashion genuine synergy between the University and its community partners to transform lives for the benefit of society.

Concluding essays are written by the U.S. secretary of Commerce, the chancellor of the UT System, and the executive vice president and COO of Seton Healthcare Network — all of whom take seriously the need for academic-civic partnerships and increasing the accountability of educational institutions.

To be clear, this isn’t a venue for disgruntled and gadfly faculty members. Contributors are prominent researchers who, while understanding the distinctive mission of academic institutions, have spent their careers building connections between the University and community without apologizing for being scholars. They realize that creating a culture of academic engagement requires accountability and collaborative problem-solving in forthright public exchanges about how to enact change.

In this spirit, readers are invited to participate — to share ideas about how best to forge new, productive connections between UT and the community. Together we can make academic engagement more the rule than the exception; through collaboration it will become a defining characteristic of UT’s brand name, designating this institution one of the truly innovative and exemplary public sites of learning in this century.

Rick Cherwitz is professor of communication studies and rhetoric and composition, and founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program (IE) at UT [https://webspace.utexas.edu/cherwitz/ www/ie/].
The strongest argument I know for academics staying in the ivory tower is this: academics serve society best when they produce new knowledge in their fields; and to produce this knowledge requires protection only from the marketplace, which values only what it can measure, but also from society itself, with its short-term focus on today’s desires or needs. Thus, research universities create an ethos of service to the field in the belief that to serve the field is to serve the world in ways that haven’t even been thought of yet.

Even in fields like mine — poetry — arguments have been made for a different kind of usefulness:

It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

— William Carlos Williams from “Asphodel, That Green Flower”

On the other side are the activists who argue that in an age of diminishing public support, academics in public universities don’t have the luxury of staying in the ivory tower — and that the ethos of the academy must change so that it can learn to recognize and reward “service” in a manner consistent with its short-term focus on today’s marketplace, which values only what it requires protection not only from the academy but also from society itself, with its short-term focus on today’s desires or needs. Thus, research universities create an ethos of service to the field in the belief that to serve the field is to serve the world in ways that haven’t even been thought of yet.

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I am an activist in many areas — yet University governance isn’t one of them. My view of the work of colleagues resembles Thoreau Veblen’s idle curiosity is the noblest intellectual motive. Political pressure on university professors is abhorrent. The first task of departmental rankings is distasteful. Once hired, faculty are left to their druthers. Even noble efforts to call this unimpressive officer corps to larger common engagement are too heroic for me.

Yet someone has to raise and spend the money. University leaders have to decide which pursuits will flourish and which will slowly wither on the budget vine. (As a recent president of Harvard allegedly said to the Divinity School: “Let God provide.”) I do believe that engaged scholarship deserves a larger share, at least in the narrow sphere of social science where I spend my academic days.

So far as my home discipline of economics still has a philosophy, it is positivist: concerned mainly with symbolic language (“theory”) and then with testing hypotheses about that theory. The language of both endeavors is deeply hermetic. And the peer group able to read and review the work is small.

It is not that I begrudge my fellow economists their models and regressions. But do we really need so many of them? Can we afford so little work on defining social problems, on measuring facts, on policy design? Where, if not in economics, government, and sociology, should our University deal with poverty and racism, with prisons and schools, with immigration and inequality, with public purposes such as health care and retirement, and with the security issues of war and peace, world development, and our energy budget? Public policy can’t do it all.

And how should a professor communicate? Only to her peers? Or to the wider world?

My own philosophy is pragmatic. It is concerned with solving problems and propagating ideas. For a pragmatic, ideas are not a scholar’s property. They are not a commodity or a brand. They are, instead, the common understandings of a community. Ideas exist only to the extent that people are engaged and passionate about them. And I’m not one of them, alas.

Engaged scholarship demands a spirit of responsible tenacity with peer review. Economics suffers today from high formalism, rigid orthodoxy, and tribal exclusiveness in professional journals; real-world scholarship is not prized and not easily published. But fortunately, with the Internet the costs of publication are falling. New journals are springing up that can peer-review effectively at low cost, and this will one day cause the breakdown of our ossified system.

In a world of virtual journals and electronic working papers, scholarly engagement has a better chance. Let’s hope that quality will still be distinguishable from junk.

Finally, for the engaged scholar there is always the tricky issue of the role of values and politics. Some scholarship is intrinsically apolitical but social scholarship can’t be. The policies I support grow from my ethical and political beliefs, to which my expertise (such as it is) merely adds an element of engineering. And yet, of course, a professor is not a missionary: A profound obligation is to respect the ideas and views of students who come in with different values.

My approach to that is to declare my own politics frankly — I’m a liberal Keynesian Democrat, in case you didn’t know. But I try to preserve my classroom as a space for respectful discourse with all points of view. And, sometimes, you pull it off. Some years ago, a student wrote these words on my confidential end-of-semester evaluation: “It pains me to say this, but you are the best professor I’ve had — even though you are a communist.”

As my late friend Walt Rostow liked to say, in this business you never know when you’re making a mistake.

James K. Galbraith holds the Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr. Chair in Business/Government Relations at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs.
Lessons a Philosopher Can Teach a Capitalist
by Robert C. Solomon

I used to admit in causal conversation: “I am a philosopher.” The response was usually a dead silence, or, if not, the question, “What’s your philosophy?” Depending on my mood, I usually answered, “A stitch in time saves nine” or “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

But for the past decade or so, I say that I am a “philosopher and business.” That gets the more welcome if still perplexed response: “That’s an interesting combination.”

Indeed it is. The eternal and the practical in a single package. The eternal virtues combined with the rough-and-tumble pursuit of profits. To me, it says something important about both what philosophy and business are about, and why they need one another.

First, philosophy. I do not say — although it is obviously true — that I am a philosophy professor. I do profess, and I take considerable pride in my teaching. But even in the classroom, my aim is not just to convey the wisdom of the ages but to give the students something they can use to live better lives and be better citizens.

And out of the classroom, too, being a philosopher means speaking to people about their real quandaries. It was the model Socrates (and at the other end of the world, Confucius) set up for us more than two millennia ago. They were citizen-scholars, exemplifying learned engagement, as my colleague Rick Cherwitz noted in these pages, taking to their rooms, my aim is not just to convey the wisdom of the ages but to give the students something they can use to live better lives and be better citizens.

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Philosophy has always been about, speaking values to power, about what both philosophy and business are about, and why they need one another.

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The professor then asks: How many of you will die of addiction? The instructor explains to students that they have it exactly backwards — it is likely that more will die of addiction than will complete graduate degrees.

One wonders whether enrollment in this class or academic research conducted by faculty can reverse such an outcome? More to the point, does the University’s academic structure stand in the way of discovering and putting to use knowledge important to society? Addiction science is multidisciplinary, controversial, not usually supported by large foundations, donors, businesses, or most government agencies — exactly the sort of obstacles not easily overcome by the University.

Many of the barriers to addiction research are shared with other complex scientific problems. First is the challenge of academic geography. At UT, addiction expertise resides in neurobiology, pharmacology, psychology, and social work. These sites of knowledge are housed in four separate colleges, each functioning as a semi-autonomous domain that inadvertently limits collaborations across academic units.

Second is the matter of funding. The University provides limited monetary support for research, investigators must obtain money from donors, businesses, or government agencies to support their science. This is a wonderfully entrepreneurial environment, one that is, of course, that is many centuries justifiably their philosophy on the basis of this consumer philosophy.

But corporations function according to a simple-minded pursuit of profits. To me, it says something important about both what philosophy and business are about, and why they need one another.

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Educating and Inspiring Scholar/Artist/Citizens

by Jill Dolan

Richard Posner, in his rather conserva-
tive Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline,
says public intellectuals must be older —
most likely emeritus professors — to be
free to make fools of themselves in front of
their colleagues. Yet the academics I know
who are most eager to shift their work
into public practice are young people
determined not to keep their ideas enclosed in ivy-covered
wells, who fear social stasis and their own irrelevance
much more than appealing the fool.
I believe a public intellectual is not the safely retired
professor or the cranky, marginalized outsider, but some-
one with something timely and important to say. The
point isn’t to be a pundit with a deadline for her next
qbaby public commentary. The point is to use our expertise
and our knowledge to advance passionate, nuanced argu-
ments to public debate by doing what we do best: com-
menting on and archiving what happens at the theater and
what it means and demonstrating how performance can help us practice (in the theatrical sense of “rehearse”)
more just, more equitable, more loving ways to live.
I teach my students to imagine particular audiences for their research. We ask, What’s this student’s right now, in this
historical moment? What do I want to say and why? To whom do I want my words to speak? And most important-
ly, Who cares? The question is not necessarily what’s orig-
inal (a scholar’s usual question), but what’s urgent? What can I say about this performance that will communique
how it changed my world, if only for a moment, how it
made me feel and act differently toward one another?
I believe deeply in performance’s power to make the world better. Because I feel the possibilities of community
constructed anew each time I go to the theater, my schol-
arship is intensely public. We need to participate in such
publics, which allow us to practice our urgent faith in the
active minds of learners. From kindergarten to graduate
level, every faculty member may need to achieve excellence
in research or excellence in teaching. But the university falls
short of its purpose if there are no rewards and recognition
for the faculty who will also achieve great public service.

Bridging the Gap between Town and Gown

by Patricia A. Hayes

1. GROW UP WITH THE CLASSICAL UNIVERSIT-
ity ideal of excellence in three critical areas of teaching, research, and service
to society. As a graduate student at a great research university and
teacher/administrator at two wonderful teaching universities, I confirmed my
understanding of and support for the first two prongs of the triad. In 1998 I left academia for an
administrative role in a large healthcare organization that touches the lives of thousands of people and accounts for
millions of dollars in public and private spending. In these six years in health care, my appreciation for the university
mission of service to society has grown dramatically.

2. Look at the rank-and-file systems at each university
to provide more credit for truly great efforts linking the
university and society. I understand that for a given univer-
sity, every faculty member may need to achieve excellence
in research or excellence in teaching. But the university falls
short of its purpose if there are no rewards and recognition
for the faculty who will also achieve great public service.

3. Develop faculty/business exchanges with a more
sophisticated realization that those who achieve excellence
data “doing” probably still remain novices at teaching and
will need an academic mentor to be effective in such an
exchange program. And the opposite is also true — that
the greatest researcher or teacher in the university will be a
novice if she or he has not had extensive experience in the
multi-stakeholder, rapid-cycle business world.

Communities like Austin that are home to world-class universities have an opportunity to become much more
involved in technological, social, and political structures if they can be more intentional about bridging the gap
between town and gown. Service can be the connector between the university and the community and a fully
developed ideal, not a stepchild of research and teaching. It is vitally important to advance service as part of the full
university mission, and it will be critical to meeting the
economic challenges of Central Texas over the coming
decades.

Patricia A. Hayes is the executive vice president and COO of
SETON Healthcare Network.

My colleagues and I, who teach in the
academic area of UT’s Department of
Theater and Dance, recently shifted
our curriculum from a more conven-
tional emphasis on theater history and criti-
cism to what we call “public performance as
public practice.” We believe that theater, as a public forum, can be used to engage
relevant social issues, as well as to offer pleasure, beauty, and deep feeling to audiences. We see performance as
meaningful in our daily lives as citizens, rather than a spe-
cial or, worse, “esoteric” event. We also work with colleagues around the University to build stronger community ties
and to facilitate arts-focused public forums across disci-
plines.

We research and teach community-based theater, the social history of theater, the performance of identity, and the civic influences of popular culture, among other top-
ics, all integral to any study of theater and performance.
Yet when we made this change in emphasis, some faculty found it heretical that we would amplify the language of
scholarship — history, criticism, theory — with language that acknowledges audience, community, and research as
something that’s part of a range of daily practices. Where does this suspicion come from? Why is it that “public,”
when added to “scholarship,” is suspect?
“Public,” implies “political,” which makes people attached to “objectivist” scholarship quite nervous. Our
program is political, but not partisan. We aim to create a community of what we call “scholar/artist/citizens,” who
insist on the importance of their work to participatory
democracy locally and nationally, even globally. Students
give me an idea of how we might feel and act differently
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The Promise of Academic Entrepreneurship

by Donald L. Evans

Great universities serve not only the people within them, but also the community and world around them. They prepare students to take on challenging careers, to embrace knowledge, and to define new frontiers. They also provide an environment for academics and researchers to study our past in order to envision our future, and to drive the innovations that move society ahead. This has a profound impact well beyond the ivory tower or the Forty Acres.

I applaud the Alcalde for this series of “academic engagement” articles designed to explore the issue of bringing higher education out of the 19th into the 21st century. Some very important issues have been raised by Professor Cherwitz and his colleagues in these pages, and, as former chairman of the UT Board of Regents, I appreciate the opportunity to provide some of my own thoughts.

While it is tempting to ask: “How does The University of Texas prepare the students of the future?”, I think we should perhaps ask a more provocative question: “What does the future require of The University of Texas?”

Over the past three-and-a-half years, I’ve had the honor of serving President Bush and the American people as secretary of commerce. This has given me the opportunity to travel the country and the world, meet with national and global leaders, and talk to CEOs, entrepreneurs, and workers. I’ve seen the brilliance and energy that create companies, drives organizations, leads to innovation, and seeks freedom. Feeding this brilliance and energy is a job much bigger than one university or even one nation, but it is exactly what the 21st century requires from The University of Texas and the United States.

We are at a defining moment in our history. We must prevail in a global war against an enemy that wants to destroy the foundation of our very society. This means seeking new ways to reach students. This means redefining the very definition of “student,” because individuals don’t stop learning when they receive a diploma. We need effective lifelong learning strategies that recognize and assign value to knowledge gained over a lifetime. We need to embrace technology to teach and learn in new ways. Imagine an education platform that connects to young people in the same way as a PlayStation. What if teenagers rushed home to play Einstein 2004 instead of Madden 2004? The possibilities are limitless, and those who pursue them will be true academic entrepreneurs.

I believe the future is calling. The University of Texas and all the talented minds that drive it in unprecedented directions. True to the great pioneering spirit of Texas, we will no doubt reach a little higher and try a little harder to achieve goals beyond ordinary limits and expectations. What an exciting time to be an academic entrepreneur.

Donald L. Evans, BS ’69, MBA ’73, has been President Bush’s first-term Secretary of Commerce and is a former chairman of the UT Board of Regents, and a 2003 Distinguished Alumnus.

As Rick Cherwitz notes, these essays on “academic engagement” were conceived around a discussion about fashioning a “synergy between the University and its community partners to transform lives for the benefit of society.” Nowhere is that imperative more obvious than in our shared interest in the public schools.

Since the 1983 publication of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s groundbreaking report, “A Nation at Risk,” policymakers have been preoccupied with how to improve public education. After all, the commission presented the situation in bleak terms: “For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.”

Over the years, we have seen many attempts to reform and improve the public schools, some more successful than others. Most notably, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed into law in 2002 is a broad effort to set standards and improve teaching methods. It seeks to foster empirically verified pedagogies, assessing with scientific rigor the impact of initiatives on students. It funds many of the tools we need to uncover the reasons that our students do not thrive in the classroom. It encourages research and development about childhood learning at the earliest ages — the time when intervention should be the most helpful.

The NCLB Act reflects continuing national concern that our children are not getting the world-class education required for their economic and social success and that of the nation.

We have cause to be concerned. Right now, Texas ranks 50th among the states in the percentage of the adult population with high school diplomas. We are 17th in college enrollments. A recent international study assessed the literacy levels of 15-year-old students from 41 countries in reading, science, and mathematics. Students from the United States ranked no higher than 15th in these areas. Here at home, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called The Nation’s Report Card, ranked the achievement of eighth graders in reading, writing, and mathematics. By even the most favorable reading of the numbers, Texas ranked 12th in 4th grade reading, 14th in 8th grade reading, and 26th in mathematics.

The NCLB Act would not be good news anywhere. For a state with a young, rapidly growing population and aspirations of greater economic leadership, they are potential embarrassment for the future of Texas and our students.

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We must build upon No Child Left Behind and make our education system as innovative and entrepreneurial as our economy. This means seeking new ways to reach students. This means redefining the very definition of “student,” because individuals don’t stop learning when they receive a diploma. We need effective lifelong learning strategies that recognize and assign value to knowledge gained over a lifetime. We need to embrace technology to teach and learn in new ways. Imagine an education platform that connects to young people in the same way as a PlayStation. What if teenagers rushed home to play Einstein 2004 instead of Madden 2004? The possibilities are limitless, and those who pursue them will be true academic entrepreneurs.

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Environmental problems require educational reform
by Jay Banner & Nelson Guda

Water is a critical natural resource around the world, and in Texas it is a particularly fragile one. Texas history is replete with accounts of water shortages, including those affecting 19th century settlers, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the 1950s drought, and the Rio Grande failing to flow to the Gulf of Mexico in 2002. In the mid-19th century, little more than a billion people populated the planet. Today, as we surpass 6.4 billion, water issues are even more severe and widespread.

The United Nations estimates that waterborne diseases cause five million deaths each year, and that by 2025 two in three people worldwide will face water shortages. In our own backyard, less visible problems include a class of contaminants recently detected in water resources: pharmaceuticals. That’s right, the water we use can contain such compounds as birth control hormones, Prozac, caffeine, antibiotics, birth control hormones, and Viagra.

These facts underscore growing concerns about the quality and security of our environment, particularly the vital resource that is water. How far can technological solutions, such as desalination of seawater, take us? How much freshwater flow is needed to protect wildlife habitats within streams, aquifers, and estuaries? What new challenges will we encounter in the face of a projected doubling of Texas’ population by 2040 and shifts in regional rainfall patterns driven by global changes in climate? Will there be sufficient quantities of clean water for drinking, agricultural, and industrial needs? If answers to these questions are not found, future Texans will be unable to balance the use and renewal of water resources, and we will continue on a path that is not sustainable.

Our ability to answer these questions depends in part upon our ability to educate tomorrow’s students with an interdisciplinary perspective reaching beyond narrow specializations. As noted by Professor Rick Cherwitz and other contributors to this issue of The Alcalde, scientific and learning breakthroughs often occur at the intersection of different disciplines. The interconnected nature of environmental problems is no exception. We need professionals trained to understand complex water problems from a variety of angles, including science, engineering, urban planning, business, and policy. Unfortunately, few graduate programs exist that educate students beyond a chosen discipline.

Scientists with a deep knowledge in their field of specialization will continue to be essential for advancing knowledge, but the importance of a broad perspective is rapidly increasing. Universities must formulate major improvements in how they engage the community and bring new knowledge from researchers to the public, in order to reverse the trend of the shrinking numbers of students in the United States who choose science and engineering careers.

So how can we meet these challenges of academic integration and engagement? Do we eliminate existing academic departments and realign resources into new departments? Or can new cross-cutting organizations meld traditionally separate disciplines? Answers vary, but the assurance of environmental programs recently formed in different U.S. universities indicates that no blueprint exists.

On a federal level, the National Science Foundation, a leading agency funding university research, now requires that such research has impacts beyond a small circle of specialists. This agency also supports elite fellowships for students who pursue an interdisciplinary PhD or creative-ly bring the excitement of university science to K-12 classrooms. Locally, UT Austin’s Environmental Science Institute was established with these same goals — to cultivate a more balanced approach to complex environmental problems in the areas of research, education, and public outreach.

These are great starts, but to guarantee success we must go the extra mile, addressing the underlying attitudinal and institutional barriers preventing achievement of genuine interdisciplinary education and engagement. It is time to construct novel degree programs — including a graduate training program in water studies — that are more than supplements and add-ons to existing curriculums and degree requirements. New programs of this sort cannot be implemented and have little chance of succeeding without grassroots buy-in to the interdisciplinary philosophy by faculty members who drive university research and education — the best of whom are already over-committed within and tied to their own disciplines. Such buy-in can be fostered through changes in the institutional structure and reward system of the University — enabling and encouraging faculty and students to connect with each other across the brick and mortar departmental walls so typical of a university setting.

Interdisciplinary graduate training and public outreach require systemic changes capable of addressing our most challenging problems, including our water future and our energy future. What is the cost of addressing these problems? Perhaps the question should be recast. In pondering our next glass of water we might ask: What will be the cost of waiting until 2040 to deal with these problems?

Jay Banner is a professor of geological sciences and director of UT Austin’s Environmental Science Institute (ESI), and Nelson Guda is an ecologist and an associate director in the ESI (www.geo.utexas.edu/esi).