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 institutions. 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. While UT is experimenting with new methods for engaging society, as evidenced by the graduate school’s nationally acclaimed Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program, the order of the day educational leaders must face is changing knowledge industries and new models of education. Educational leaders must be imaginative and bold, willing — even if initially unpopular — to question academic and administrative geography. After all, much of academic current organization is a holdover from prior centuries, which no longer meets the needs of a quickly changing knowledge industry. New knowledge and innovative educational experiences would not be supplements to a tradition system — just as new tax regulations aren’t the corrective to an already convoluted IRS structure. Further, they would replace status quo methods of delivery, encouraging new 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, utilitarian 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 voluntary, constituting more than the third — often undefined and less accountable — function of the University.

Invigorating and reshaping the connection between academics and society could provide answers to 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 develop collaborative, synergistic methods for integrating universities’ massive intellectual capital with the resources of the community.

What will it take to make this happen, to bring UT’s legacy will be born anew instead. — Rick Cherwitz is professor in communication studies and division of rhetoric and composition and founder of UT’s Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program recently renamed Professional Development and Community Engagement (www.utexas.edu/ods/development.html)

Forty Acres

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