

INTRODUCTION

Mabel L. Rice
University Distinguished Professor
Director, Merrill Advanced Studies Center
University of Kansas

The papers in this collection represent discussions that took place at the fourth regional conference sponsored by the Merrill Advanced Studies Center on the topic of research in public universities. We hosted “Making Research a Part of the Public Agenda” on June 7 - 9, 2000 at the retreat center in Valley Falls, Kansas. The gathering included twenty-two administrators and senior faculty scientists from five research institutions: The University of Kansas (including the Medical Center), Kansas State, Nebraska (including the Medical Center), Missouri at Columbia, and Iowa State University. George Walker, Vice President for Research at Indiana University, was the keynote speaker and commentator. We were fortunate to be joined by a Kansas legislator, Representative Ralph Tanner, and by the chair of the Kansas Board of Regents, William R. Docking. Also, this year, we included business leaders from the Kansas City metropolitan area for a special panel on plans to create a research center in the life sciences. Keith Yehle, a member of Senator Pat Roberts staff, joined us once again. We also hosted Heather Wingate, chief of staff for Senator Sam Brownback.

This year’s topic followed naturally from the three previous regional conferences. The inaugural conference in 1997 focused on pressures that hinder the research mission of higher education, with special consideration of public research universities. In 1998, we turned our attention to competing for new resources, and ways to enhance individual and collective productivity. In particular, our keynote speaker of that year, Michael Crow, encouraged us to identify niche areas for research focus, under the premise that it was most promising to do selective areas of investigation at the highest levels of excellence. In 1999, we examined in more depth cross-university alliances. Keynote speaker Luis Proenza encouraged participants to think in terms of “strategic intent” and he highlighted important precedents in university-industry cooperation as well as links between institutions.

This year, we again invited five universities representing the four-corner states of Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri. We focused on the impact of the sciences, in particular, with an eye toward economic development and improvements in the quality of life. The following collection of papers captures the energetic and enthusiastic nature of the dialogues that took place at the conference, beginning with the keynote

address of George Walker. He encouraged us to meet the needs of our state citizens, business leaders and students who are quite able to "carry our water" and champion the cause of research as a valuable state resource.

Over the two days of the conference, presenters and discussants explored the dynamic interface between research initiatives at public universities and the response of public constituencies in light of actual and potential research outcomes in science. Central to this discussion was our attempt to understand the public's perception of research activities and our collective views on the role of the university. Key issues included the university's obligation to communicate effectively about the conduct, outcomes, and costs of research endeavors. We also discussed the need to ensure creative inquiry, and to recognize the social benefits of research. In addition, we explored the efficacy of collaborative inquiry in order to advance research, pool intellectual resources, and distribute costs across a broader base of support. It is clear that these issues transcend the research lab and the local campus, and extend into the hallways of state legislatures and the Congress. These are vital issues for governing educational boards, local communities, and the commercial sector, as well as our private donors and individual citizens who participate as advocates for the university.

It is with pleasure that I encourage you to read each of the following contributions for a sense of many issues involved in research and the wealth of possibilities for public engagement. I wish to express deep appreciation for the assistance of Joy Simpson in the organization of the conference, in her careful notes taken during the proceedings, and her editorial finesse in the preparation of this document. Patsy Woods provided valuable assistance with the financial arrangements for the conference. As always, the proprietors of The Barn bed and breakfast provided a congenial atmosphere for discussion and conversation.