

PUBLIC PERCEPTION: SEEING OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US

Marsha R. Torr
Vice Chancellor for Research
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The theme for this meeting is certainly most timely and I am pleased to participate in such a discussion with universities that have so many issues in common with us in Nebraska.

Universities and scientists have struggled for some time with how we might do a better job of informing the public about the worth of public research universities and the central role of research. We continue to do this less well than we would like and we continue to be surprised—and even amazed—by the interpretations of what we do and how we do it.

At the University of Nebraska - Lincoln we have recently taken a step toward improved public relations by forming what we call our Institutional Marketing Team. Its purpose is to help shape a more coordinated image. This effort links our administration, public relations people, deans, and alumni association. To our key audiences we convey messages that go beyond Husker football and distill the importance of our academic and research mission. Of course the extent to which this is successful depends on the message and how we present it.

One of the greatest difficulties in life is to get a glimpse of how others see us. It is difficult for individuals to step back and try to look at themselves, and it is even more difficult for institutions to do this—particularly institutions that have a public mission and public sources of support.

The public perception of the value and role of a public university may be rather different from the view that we within the institution have of our purpose—hopefully with large areas of overlap. However, we see ourselves as being so much more than we are given credit for and we often end up feeling under-appreciated and misunderstood.

What does the public expect of its research universities? The education of its citizens tops the list. However, we must consider several issues in this respect. There is not always an appreciation of competition universities experience. Students today have many options, are very mobile, and will vote with their feet. There is not always an appreciation of

the competitive nature of the job market—which is driving students in their choice of institution. Universities see themselves as magnets for talent and improving the quality of that talent is always a goal, yet there can be a backlash against our search for the "brightest and best." Availability is often seen by the public as more important than quality. So what is good enough? And we know that quality requires resources far beyond those the states are providing

So, there is not a good appreciation of what we do, how it benefits the state, or why it costs what it costs. This is particularly true for those of us who are in land grant institutions where there is a historic sense of ownership in the institution by the agricultural interests. We find ourselves in institutions that have gone through significant changes in our funding base. In many cases it is only a few decades ago that our institutions received 60-80% of our resources from the state. At the University of Nebraska - Lincoln this is now down to 31% and is still high by comparison with many public research universities for which the average may be in the mid-20%. Yet a large portion of our public has no understanding of the fact that we must now turn to other sources of revenue to put in place the laboratories and research fellowships and computing infrastructure and faculty and libraries that we must have to meet the basic needs of the state in education. Our own faculty in many cases do not understand this, so we have certainly failed to explain our fiscal needs and sources outside the institution. We must explain to the public that sponsored research allows us to enhance the quality of the institution.

Another important public expectation is that the university should be a source of expert, unbiased assessment of issues. Of course we arrive at this level of competence through the same means by which we build the faculty and research resources that establish the caliber of the learning at an institution. And so credibility and objectivity are amongst the institution's most important assets. Once credibility and objectivity are lost, the image of the research university is badly damaged. Independent, valuable opinion does not come easily or cheaply. We have not explained this well.

A third expectation is that the research universities will enhance economic development in the region—a factor that is very true but often oversold or sold on the wrong elements. In our enthusiasm to promote ourselves as "economic engines" we risk making bad deals that verge on using tuition funds to underwrite corporate welfare or that place our objectivity at risk.

Some years ago I was with NASA and worked with the leadership team of a shuttle mission. Because one of the payload specialists was a Belgian, after the mission concluded the astronauts, the mission manager

and I were invited to Belgium to have lunch with the King and Queen. At lunch we were discussing the falling fortunes of NASA and its difficulty in holding the interest of the public even though it was doing very challenging and innovative things. The public had tired of NASA and took it for granted. Whereupon the King said, "Well Coca Cola would know how to solve this—they would bring in a good advertising company." We are somewhat in that situation. Much of what we do is very good—indeed remarkable—and interesting, but **how do we keep it fresh and interesting to our supporters?** This is the challenge.

The public does get interested in what we do—but often in ways we do not like. There are issues in which the public university plays a central role that can take on a life of their own and actually spin out of control. We see this in research areas such as genetically modified foods (GMOs), fetal tissue research, and evolution. Public response to GMOs has taken turns that were not anticipated a few years ago. Yet, with our unbiased credibility as our currency, I hear my own faculty and administrators saying things like: "We just have to do a better job in explaining why GMOs are OK." Why do we have to do a better job in explaining this—who are we representing? Do we really have the answers yet? Is there an answer? It seems to me we could be framing the discussions without being forced into an advocacy position.

Right now there is so much at play in the public arena that we are unconsciously staging a backdrop that will inform public opinion in many areas. We are well beyond the few anecdotes and into a broad spectrum of publicity that if not understood and managed, will set the public agenda for us. And research is right at the center.

In seeking to inform the public about what we do, we need to assess and understand our audience. I recommend a book that recently came out called *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism*. The author ponders the fact that the achievements of research in the past few decades have been staggering and everyone has been impacted. Yet while books by Gould, Sagan and others do not make it onto the best-seller lists, pseudo-science does; Deepak Chopra's *The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old* and anything on alien abductions sell well. One may suggest that in talking about what we do, we should use strange and wonderful terms. Consider the possibilities just in my own field—Physics—where we are in a world of space warps, worm holes, strings and superstrings, and things have names like Truth, Beauty, Charm and Strangeness. Perhaps we have led people to believe that anything strange can happen. The author concludes that we have allowed others to usurp (or hijack) our language and, unhindered by our constraints, they use it to develop logic-free concepts that intrigue the general public. A person described as a "postmodern theologian" explains how angels are

like photons and move at the speed of light. Otherwise intelligent people are buying these books. Academics have the "real thing" and stammer about it.

We do not really understand our audiences or how to talk to them. Can we learn from issues that excite people?

And we are at some risk of sending the wrong message. Two pillars of the university—on the one hand the drive for quality (and hence the pursuit of dollars to build that quality) and, on the other hand the university's role as the state's/nation's unbiased source of assessment—are at risk of being on a collision course. Hence the public's willingness to support and sustain the universities may falter. At that collision point is the research enterprise.

There are many issues that must at the very least be confusing to the public. And these developments are enabled by very rapidly changing technologies—the outcomes of which will be on us before we have had much chance to map the trends. We see examples of this in the GMO debate, in concerns about ethical aspects of biological research, and in the fears expressed by people like Bill Joy who speaks to the potential for uncontrolled destruction latent in new technologies about 20 years away.

But there are simpler matters, such as the appearance of universities making substantial money from public investment—as in drug development—and then private corporations making even bigger money by selling products that only some can afford, many of which were developed in our public institutions with public funds and intended for the public good. These circumstances cultivate perceptions that are not understood. Another relevant issue involves the ownership and sale of data sets vs. immediate, universal availability of information—and with universal access, the potential for massive public good and harm.

We must ask ourselves: Are our institutions at risk of losing the high ground? We have traditionally presented unbiased, in-depth assessments of complex issues. However, we now experience tremendous pressure to find dollars that will build quality, cutting-edge programs, coupled with a tremendous drive to enter and explore and manipulate the unknown. How do we find ways to cover the costs of objectivity? Of course, we are entering the unknown at such speed that there is little time to assess the landscape ahead. Once the public confidence is shaken, it takes decades to reclaim what has taken a century to build. Is our moral authority at risk?

On the other hand, who else can provide guidance through this new landscape? We must do it to the best of our abilities. And our ability to do it will depend on how well we tackle the topic of this meeting.