

Universities & Public Service Leadership

By Cullen C. Merritt

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS is currently implementing a five-year strategic plan, appropriately named *Bold Aspirations*. It is the product of university leadership dedicated to achieving outcomes of public value: The mission of this strategic initiative is "to lift students and society by educating leaders, building healthy communities and making discoveries that change the world."

Recruitment and retention of students and diverse faculty members, commitment to teaching and mentoring and preparing doctoral students for careers in research are among the goals that will enable the university to fulfill the mission of *Bold Aspirations*. Perhaps more importantly—for the purpose of impacting the public good—*Bold Aspirations* seeks to achieve ambitious strategic objectives that extend beyond the university's most basic educational functions and purposes. Two objectives in particular stand out—the university aims to "enhance research broadly with special emphasis upon areas of present and emerging strength in order to push the boundaries of knowledge and benefit society" and "engage local, state, national and global communities as partners in scholarly activities that have direct public impact."

Bernadette Gray-Little, chancellor of the University of Kansas, and Provost Jeffery S. Vitter are the central figures in the implementation of *Bold Aspirations*. Their leadership in guiding this academic institution toward achieving the mission and objectives of *Bold Aspirations* highlights the University of Kansas' commitment to public service. Moreover, their advocacy of this strategic plan underscores that universities, given their capacity and breadth of expertise, are uniquely positioned to fulfill the public good. Simply put, Gray-Little and Vitter demonstrate that to an extent public university leaders are, first and foremost, public servants. Their institutions can be better positioned to change the world through research, teaching and service. Specifically, Gray-Little and Vitter have positioned the University of Kansas to achieve public outcomes by skillfully

adhering to four of the major functions of university leadership proposed by higher education scholar, Frederick E. Balderston.

First, they have lead efforts to clarify the mission of the university and identify long-range objectives and shorter range goals. This is demonstrated through the advocacy of the strategic plan through a variety of mediums including the *Bold Aspirations* Visitor and Lecture Series, the Chancellor's annual State of the University Address (provided to university stakeholders and the world through YouTube) and the *Bold Aspirations* Twitter account which keeps the university community up to speed with the progress of this initiative. One would be hard pressed to find a student, faculty member or external stakeholder who is not informed of the mission and objectives of *Bold Aspirations* and how they relate to the underlying values of the university.

Secondly, the chancellor and provost have directed the appropriate allocation of organizational resources to achieve the objectives associated with the strategic plan. For example, the second objective of *Bold Aspirations* aims to "prepare doctoral students as innovators and leaders who are ready to meet the demands of the academy and our global society." Of the many strategies employed to fulfill this objective, the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Kansas anticipates distributing approximately \$1,000,000 in university graduate fellowship funding to doctoral programs. The university's graduate studies website indicates that the intent of the fellowship is to "support departmental efforts that are aligned with the strategies and action items identified in strategic goal 2 of *Bold Aspirations*."

Thirdly, university leadership has called for the institution to invest in the selection and evaluation of key personnel, the fifth objective of *Bold Aspirations*. According to the strategic plan, this begins by enhancing the recruitment process by identifying and removing barriers to recruitment and adopting Hiring for Excellence protocols. Training and mentorship are the means through which the university aims to retain

faculty members. Evaluation of faculty members will be enhanced through the development and implementation of university-wide faculty policies for post-tenure review.

Lastly, Gray-Little and Vitter have lead efforts to engage key stakeholders throughout the strategic planning process. In fact, the creation of *Bold Aspirations* benefited from contributions of external stakeholders including alumni and community and business leaders. The inclusion, collaboration and transparency that results from the university's engagement will, as stated in the strategic plan, help strengthen the integrity of the University of Kansas' ideas and will "provide a strong foundation to ensure successful implementation."

Implementing a comprehensive strategic plan aligned with an enterprise's core values is more than a notion, particularly in university settings. Michael D. Cohen, James G. March and Johan P. Olson indicate in a 1972 *Administrative Science Quarterly* article titled "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," that colleges and universities are "organized anarchies." Balderston notes that this organizational characteristic lends itself to certain agency behavioral tendencies: agreement on goals is not feasible; formal authority offers no institutional direction and few constraints on individual choices; and, to the extent that the institution is run, it runs itself. In addition, Balderston provides that university academic units and senior faculty members have considerable discretion—they choose how to spend their time; vie for achievement and recognition in their own fields; and have the power to resist what they regard as inappropriate demands on them or intrusions on their freedom to act and think.

Despite the University of Kansas' decentralized structure and "organized anarchy" predisposition, both of which are typical of major public research universities, Gray-Little and Vitter have not only rallied the university community behind *Bold Aspirations*; they are witnessing headway in only its second year. In the annual report on the

progress of *Bold Aspirations* released in fall 2012, Provost Vitter indicated that the university is experiencing gains in multiple objectives through the successful implementation of a range of strategies including: establishing a new university core curriculum for all undergraduate students, strengthening the pipelines of undergraduates to and through the University of Kansas, investing in first year experiences; developing sustainable funding for doctoral education; and pursuing multidisciplinary strategic initiatives. Although additional time is required to measure the effectiveness of the strategic plan in its entirety, Gray-Little and Vitter have already demonstrated how university leaders can position their institutions to achieve university objectives and public outcomes simultaneously.

Beyond the most basic functions of university leadership, Gray-Little and Vitter have demonstrated that universities can—and must—structure their mission and objectives, strategically and otherwise, to benefit the community and the world. Robert Birnbaum and Peter D. Eckel, higher education scholars, rightly note that "there is no educational, social, or political consensus on exactly what higher education should be doing...." However, Gray-Little and Vitter would contend that universities should contribute, generally speaking, to the local, state, national and global well-being through research, teaching and service. Put differently, the public service leadership demonstrated by Gray-Little and Vitter thus far during the implementation of *Bold Aspirations* indicates that they recognize that public universities are no longer the ivory towers of yesteryears. Rather, universities are laboratories of intellect that (should) benefit the public good.

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