

# RESPONSIBILITIES OF LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

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The obvious function of any university is to conduct educational programs. This function, as commonly conceived of, consists of three interrelated parts: (1) imparting knowledge, (2) developing skills, including decision making, and (3) evolving attitudes and values. Envisioned is a great reservoir spilling forth information which permeates the whole of society and facilitates the evolution of man. But this is hardly a sufficient role for a university. Clearly, any university worthy of the name must do more than serve as a storehouse for knowledge and as a dispenser of information. A university must broaden the horizons of understanding by creating new knowledge, mobilizing information, and synthesizing existing knowledge in a manner which can give man greater control over his environment. All great universities conduct research programs which probe the unknown and seek new truths. Fundamentally, in their research programs the universities seek to isolate the conditions of change, to understand the processes of change, and to predict its consequences.

Research replenishes and fortifies the reservoir of knowledge and provides the fuel for the engine of progress. However, research results in progress only when it is used to improve the welfare of mankind. Otherwise, it is little more than a sterile academic exercise. Research scientists, themselves, generally gain personal and professional satisfaction from the knowledge that their research is useful. Accompanying the obligation of the university to seek new knowledge, therefore, is a responsibility to present this knowledge to society in a manner that enables people to relate the findings of research to existing knowledge. Only in this way can the new knowledge be judged relative to the needs of the people.

## THE MISSION OF THE LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITIES

This obligation to transmit new knowledge to the people is particularly important in the case of the land-grant universities. These institutions are not just universities; they are publicly supported universities. The land-grant universities were created in the belief that education could be made the servant of the masses in improving the welfare of mankind. The charter of the land-grant

universities was developed with emphasis upon people—not things. Therefore, they have a particular responsibility to help people to apply knowledge in the solution of their social, economic, and technological problems.

If the land-grant universities are to perform this role in a creditable manner, they must make the problems and opportunities of the people an integral part of their program. Hence, the land-grant universities have a moral obligation—not just an opportunity—to be sensitive to the needs of people and to provide dynamic leadership in improving the welfare of the people. Confidence and respect are earned through service. Service is judged by the effectiveness with which needs are met. Nevertheless, research and educational programs must not be restricted to “felt needs.” The “felt needs” often are ephemeral. To respond blindly to each expression of need is impossible. Moreover, to do so reflects a lack of leadership. The land-grant universities are expected to do more than to respond and to react to pressures. Their programs are expected to reflect leadership, vision, and perspective in their own right.

This role dictates that the programs of the land-grant institutions must be forward looking. The researchers and educators must ask themselves the question, “What will be the problems of tomorrow?” The extent to which problems can be anticipated, the causes and consequences analyzed, and alternative solutions weighed before the problems become serious is a definite measure of the effectiveness of research and educational programs. When problems can be anticipated and placed in a long-run context, organized and orderly attacks can be planned. Programs which are based entirely upon generally felt needs usually are too late to aid decision makers in making their decisions. One of the goals of the educator is to prevent problems from becoming acute. This can be done only if the programs of the universities provide the necessary leadership.

As our society has become more complex, the public problems which have emerged also have become manifold. The virtual explosion of knowledge in this decade and the associated technological changes and economic development have brought a growing interdependence among groups in our society and have created a greater social conscience in our universities.

Structural stresses and strains are the insidious aspect of economic growth and development. Different persons are affected differently in the process. The universities have an obligation not only to make possible a greater fulfillment of the economic life for those who bear the burden of these changes but also to assist those

who gain from them. This obligation extends to the people as individuals, to communities as groups of people, and to institutions as instruments of progress. The need is as broad as the problems of the people who are a part of the changes. It involves the whole complex of local, national, and international changes which affect the environment of man and his relationships to his fellow man. To cope with it in an effective manner demands dedication on the part of the university of a broad spectrum of its resources ranging from the physical and biological sciences to the social sciences and humanities.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

The Scope Report of 1946 leaves little doubt of the responsibility of the land-grant universities for conducting strong, purposeful, forthright programs in the area of public affairs. It defines this responsibility as follows:

From a functional standpoint this responsibility includes: (1) the diffusing of information, (2) the development of interest in and recognition of significant problems, (3) the encouragement of planning the best ways and means of solving the problems recognized whether by individual or group action, and (4) stimulation of appropriate action by people themselves in accordance with the decisions they themselves have reached.

In 1948 the Joint Committee Report on Extension Programs, Policies, and Goals recognized that national policy considerations require increased knowledge, improved understanding of the fundamental changes taking place in our society, more skill in decision making, new interests in group and social problems as well as in individual problems, and changes in attitudes and values of the people. The report emphasized, however, that the role of the educator is not actually to produce these changes but to create an environment and experiences which are conducive to self change. Indeed, this report explicitly recognizes that the land-grant universities have a moral obligation to conduct meaningful, effective programs in the area of public affairs and that merely to disseminate facts relating to conditions at any point in time is not sufficient. Instead, the obligation extends to the teaching of principles that relate to the political, social, and economic structure of our society, to analyses of the stresses and strains to which it is subjected, and to alternative programs to cushion the shocks.

These were bold steps forward. History will record the period of the late 1940's as one in which land-grant university leadership took giant strides forward in its determination to make democracy a working and effective form of political and social organization for

a nation. These strides represent a reassertion of faith in democracy and in the belief that a functionally effective democracy requires an intelligent and enlightened citizenry capable of acting wisely in private and in public affairs. The steps constitute a further recognition that citizen participation as well as citizen awareness and understanding of public problems is prerequisite to the effective operation of the democratic processes. Clearly, these giant steps opened wide the doors for the land-grant universities and challenged them to fulfill their moral commitments to educate the masses. In accepting this challenge the universities committed themselves to even wider public service.

In view of the strong, forthright, positive legitimization of public affairs education by the land-grant universities, the authors of the reports referred to above must be disillusioned by the rather ineffectual programs currently conducted by the land-grant institutions in the area of public affairs. Certainly, the land-grant universities can take little pride in the meager, irresolute, vacillating programs which have been developed. Few institutions have moved ahead under their own steam to develop creditable programs in public affairs. The resources which have been devoted to the area by the extension services are far too meager to meet the needs of farm families in understanding and adjusting to the changing structure of agriculture. Moreover, nonfarm developments are of growing importance to farmers and also require attention.

Meanwhile farmers continue to be bombarded from all sides by conflicting opinions and advice with regard to what is best for their welfare and the welfare of the nation. In a few instances the farmers themselves have voiced their disillusionment with the land-grant universities and their unwillingness to reallocate their resources to provide more effective leadership in this important area.

The reluctance of the land-grant universities to develop strong programs of public affairs stems in part from the fact that the educational techniques which have been employed by these universities are not readily transferable to the area of public affairs. The educational programs of the land-grant universities "cut their teeth" on the belief that one of the responsibilities of the universities was to make decisions for their clientele. Consequently, the agricultural extension services of the nation developed around the idea that extension was responsible for advising farmers concerning the varieties of crops to plant, the amounts of fertilizers to use, the production and marketing practices to employ, and related matters.

The universities were quick to see that the area of public affairs

was a controversial area and that they could not in good conscience plead for academic freedom—freedom of intellect, speech, and action—and at the same time provide specific recommendations to the people with regard to the position they should take on public affairs issues. Above all, the universities desired, and found it necessary, to maintain an environment conducive to free and independent inquiry if they were to perform the research and education roles expected of them by the people. Obviously, this was impossible if they should become partisan in matters of public policy.

Research can and does provide a great deal of information which is useful in policy formulation. Nevertheless, in most instances educational programs in public affairs cannot be postponed until the relevant facts become available. Frequently, the nature of the work is such that the facts simply do not exist. Decisions must be made before the relevant information can be generated through research. Alternatives which have not been tested and which lie beyond the bounds of empirical experience must be examined. The world in which we live must be evaluated with respect to worlds that might be. How individuals and groups would fare in these worlds must be estimated. Hence, it is necessary to hypothesize and to theorize with regard to possible outcomes.

Yet, meaningful educational programs in public policy cannot be conducted without involving controversial questions. The universities recognized that in the development of programs in public affairs they are operating in an area characterized by long-cherished values and opinions. The very essence of public policy problems is conflict, compromise, and consent. Policy involves value judgments concerning what is good and bad and how society should be structured and operated. These ideas are deep-seated, conflicting, and powerful. Moreover, the hierarchy of valuations differs among individuals. Consequently, given the same data, analyses, and scientific conclusions, individuals and groups may arrive at different decisions with regard to which policies are desirable.

Indeed, the very existence of these conflicts magnifies the need for public affairs education. The public affairs specialist is expected to deal with conflicts in ideas. The most powerful force in coping with ideas is other ideas. In a democratic framework the merit of ideas is tested by bringing them into conflict with other ideas where the conflicts can be identified and resolved. In this process beliefs with respect to facts may be challenged and subsequently rejected. When this happens, valuations based upon the rejected beliefs are undermined and discarded. Thus, in some instances, research and education may lead to reconciliation of differences in valuations.

Even so, generally it will not be possible to reconcile differences in valuations and to arrive at agreement with respect to the desirability of policies. Seldom, if ever, is opinion on policies unanimous. Most policies are made possible only by the fact that those in the minority consent to abide by the will of the majority until they can acquire a majority.

The universities recognized, therefore, that they could not within the scope of their normal operations make recommendations with regard to policies. To “become involved” in public affairs was to run the risk of compromising academic integrity. Science has not yet developed a method of specifying “best” policies. Research and education provide information and techniques of analysis to aid us in gaining an understanding of the effects of policies. People decide what is best with reference to their valuations. But the boundaries between education and policy are not always clearly defined [1]. The staffs of the universities are composed of people. These people—products of society—possess their own valuations. And, indoctrination is difficult, if not impossible, to separate from education. Nevertheless, with confidence in the academic integrity of its staff, the universities must accept this risk.

A further danger is that the programs of the universities may be “out of phase” with public opinion at any point in time. The land-grant universities cannot assume inevitable and automatic support of knowledge. They must serve deservedly to maintain the support, confidence, and public trust vested in them. In any bold, imaginative, forward-looking program mistakes—errors of commission—are likely to be made. But, these will probably be of only passing importance in comparison with the errors of omission. To fail to develop programs which anticipate the real needs of the people is to undermine the confidence of the public in the universities. The most favorable image that the university can develop in the public mind is that of an interested institution which is ready, willing, and able to meet the needs of the people.

#### IN CONCLUSION

When the people of the nation gave the universities the authority for free and independent inquiry, they vested in these institutions the public trust to cope with controversial questions. They expect the universities to serve as an intellectual haven where deep-seated and conflicting points of view may be expressed and debated. The universities are expected neither to make nor to administer public policy. They are expected to help people to understand the society in which they live, to analyze problem situations which

develop in it, and to evaluate alternative courses of action to cope with these problems.

A point that has been repeatedly emphasized in this conference is that in our society pressure groups, organizations, and citizens as a whole make ultimate decisions on policy matters by voting in referendums, selecting and electing candidates, developing platforms, and exercising their voice through pressure groups and representatives. Nevertheless, only those who are aware of the issues, the alternatives, and their consequences are in a position to make intelligent decisions. Educational institutions have the responsibility of creating this understanding. To fail in the development of strong educational programs in public affairs is to leave the uninformed to the mercy of those who would tell them what to do. In a society which is organized and operated through a highly centralized government, where decisions are made by arbitrary decree and obedience is assured by force, this procedure may be appropriate. It most certainly is not appropriate in a society in which good government depends on the will and wisdom of the people.

In a free and open society a free and continuous flow of information is an essential element of citizen awareness of issues and citizen participation in the democratic processes. Such a flow of information is not automatically achieved. It must be pursued resolutely. The public affairs programs conducted by the universities and by other institutions will assume even more importance in this informational and educational role in our society in the future. The acceptance of this role by the universities and the effectiveness with which it is carried out may well determine whether that great social experiment which we have come to know as American democracy will reach the state of maturity and fruition which it so richly deserves.

#### REFERENCE

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