

Staff Paper

Results of the NASULGC's National Synthesis
Conference in Relation to the Overall
Land Grant University Metamorphosis

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Results of the NASULGC's National Synthesis Conference in Relation to the Overall Land Grant University Metamorphosis*

by

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In preparing to write a book on the future of the "land grant idea," I have been visiting with presidents, trustees, administrators, faculty and clientele on a number of land grant campuses. So I have some impressions to share. However, I never thought of my effort as a study of "Metamorphosis"--i.e., how to turn a land grant caterpillar into a butterfly. I am indebted to the creative organizers of this Conference for a most imaginative metaphor for my work.

My assignment today is to place the Conference results in the context of the current state of affairs in the land grant system. Let me first take you back to 1974 and remind you of the classic article which you may have read, "Agriculture, the Island Empire" by Jean Mayer and his son Andre. Jean Mayer was a nutrition scientist and long time president of Tufts. They described agricultural science as the first science, and one that developed as a systems science--i.e., in the unavoidable context of biological systems. But they also described agriculture as isolated from the rest of science, an isolated island of farmers, and their organizations, land grant universities and the USDA--i.e., the land grant system.

Since that article was published, the values and problems of society have changed. Society's expectations of us are still changing and our slowness to respond is leading society to demand greater

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accountability and to legislate performance standards. Consequently our immediate environment is not what it once was. Clearly:

1. The university's covenant with society is failing and is up for renewal,
2. The post-World War II covenant of science with society is unraveling,
3. The federal-state land grant partnership is coming apart, and
4. The political base of colleges of agriculture has eroded, both inside the university and outside in society.

Today, I find the leadership generally knows that "the system" is in trouble--quite unlike a decade ago when many were still in denial. Land grant faculty are confused and, with exceptions, on balance still resist the idea that their enterprise must change in any fundamental way. You cannot move a university without moving its faculty, and it is at the level of the faculty that most of the change must occur. Faculty must lead and be led to an understanding of the imperatives of their new environment by land grant leadership who understand and care: mostly vice presidents for agriculture, deans, directors, chairs and faculty leaders.

Our island empire, our isolated self-sufficiency, has collapsed. We only infrequently stand together and our critics are growing. We are no longer able to resist all external forces. We must adapt and soon, as the window of opportunity, in my judgment, is now about to pass us by. The question is how and in what direction do we move. The defensive posture so common over the last two or more decades will not work. It was never more than a delaying tactic.

The Land Grant Idea And Its Origin

It is important that our adaptation to society's needs have a clear fix on the land grant idea and its origin, for this is our comparative advantage in American higher education and our historically unique role. I find that understanding of this role is sometimes confused or incomplete. Exploration of the early

historical materials tells me that the land grant idea is not about a specific institutional arrangement, but is a set of beliefs about the social role of the university in society. Thus, the original 19th century beliefs were that the land grant university exists to:

1. Provide broad access to higher education, irrespective of wealth or social status,
2. Educate and train the professional cadres of an industrial, increasingly urban society, and to
3. Strengthen and defend American democracy by improving and assuring the welfare and social status of the largest, most disadvantaged groups in society--which in the 19th century were farmers and industrial workers (called mechanics).

It is necessary to understand that the land grant movement was led, not by farmers as such, but by middle class professionals who feared that the industrialization of 19th century America was pushing agrarian and urban workers into a disadvantaged under class. These workers were seen as exploited economically, deprived of their political and economic rights, and denied the respect due citizens of a democratic society. They saw Mellon, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Gould, Fisk and others, a small powerful elite, amassing great fortunes while farmers and industrial workers were being reduced to the status of peasants. This concentration of power, they believed, threatened to destroy democratic institutions and the existence of a middle class. The land grant idea was above all a profoundly democratic movement. Its leaders fervently believed in democracy and were determined to assure a future in which all citizens, not just an elite, shared in the fruits of liberty and the individual rights promised in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. The colleges of agriculture and the USDA were partners in this movement.

If the land grant idea is to survive into the next century, it must become a valued mission of the other colleges of the university, especially the professional schools. These colleges, like Agriculture *serve and participate in* specific sectors of society, but generally do not see themselves as land grant in

philosophy or commitment. Society's growing expectation of help from universities is leading to a perception of *outreach to society* as a primary role of the public university in the 21st century. This is happening in higher education, public and private, although it may take several decades to achieve a clear form. It will happen completely independent of what land grant universities do, and whether colleges of agriculture survive or not. If you have any doubt about these assertions, read the writings of Derek Bok, former President of Harvard and Mary Walshok's 1995 book, Knowledge Without Boundaries. Bok urges his peers in private universities to be more responsive to society's problems, pointing out that the immense scale of public funding of private institutions entails an obligation to serve society. Mary Walshok details in her book how the conventional components of the university, public and private, can and should support and reach out into society to assist in societal problem solving. This "how to do it" book is full of cases, none from agriculture and without any dependence on or reference to the land grant tradition and experience.

In addition, I believe we all should have read by now Donald Schön's 1983 volume on The Reflective Practitioner. Schön argues that the knowledge base for outreach from the university to society differs in nature from that of the core disciplines of the university. He demonstrates how outreach requires a different epistemology--a different way of knowing--because in outreach we face, not the stylized and carefully defined problems of science, but the ill-defined often large and messy problems of society that must be addressed from the perspective of eclectically combined subject matters and analytic methods that allow one to think more clearly about societal options for action and their potential impact on some specific problem.

While I believe "the outreach university" will evolve no matter what we do, the land grant universities have a culture and a tradition that gives us an advantage over non-land grant institutions in responding to society's most urgent needs. We should be leading the parade. But to a great extent I find

that many in society do not care what we do. They have written us off or, what scares me most, have never heard of the land grant idea in the sense of understanding what it has meant to society, and what land grant universities are about or should be doing.

Reflections on the Listening Sessions

Let me comment on several of the assessments of the land grant system from the Listening Sessions.

1. It was said that the land grant colleges have abandoned traditional clientele, have an “ivory tower” focus on disciplines and professional journals and also that extension is diverting resources to non-agricultural clientele. My comment is that we must be careful politically to carry old clientele with us in support of the broadening of our focus. Also, in my judgment, if Extension does not broaden its programmatic focus to adapt to local agendas, the county level structure will eventually disappear for agriculture and for everyone else that it serves or could potentially serve. Today 24% of Extension’s total budget nationally is provided by local units of government (NRC). These resources will not long remain in place, if the agendas of local government are not adequately served by Extension.
2. The land grant colleges were urged to cooperate to avoid duplication between states in research and extension. I agree but there are some challenges to face here. First, almost all state legislatures resist funding services in other states, do not see or trust the quid pro quo and see a major accountability problem. Secondly, if taken too far this erodes the capacity to adapt innovations from basic science to the millions of ecosystems in agriculture.
3. It also was said that the land grant system must convince Congress and the larger science community of the unique role of agricultural science. Absolutely, but many in Congress

and in the National Academy of Sciences see Hatch formula funds and all funding of smaller land grant colleges as supporting “poor quality science.” By this, I have discovered, they mean applied science that, of course, is “not good basic science.” This reflects a profound ignorance of the location specific biological nature of agriculture with its millions of eco-systems. They do not understand that most of the increased agricultural productivity they attribute to basic science investments would never have seen the light of day without the very decentralized capacity of the system of land grant colleges of agriculture, which *adapt* new science knowledge to specific eco-systems *and maintain that productivity* against the inevitable assaults of disease and pests (see figure 1). Our educational challenge is greater than the Listening Session suggests.

4. The focus on the role of the land grant system misses one of the major changes. With more and more of the research for agriculture and its delivery in the private sector, well outside of the land grant system, coordinating the continuum of knowledge for agriculture becomes more complex, requires conscious effort and is a role for which the land grant system is best suited (see Figure 1).
5. It was said also that we must educate the society to understand and appreciate agriculture and the food system. However, the emphasis seemed to be on communication and education which while necessary are clearly not sufficient to affect the perception of the land grant system. If we are to change the negative image of agriculture, the USDA and the land grant colleges, and if we are to achieve any new goals:
 - a. We must become proactive and positive in public policy action--or external forces will decide our future for us,

- b. We must be prepared to compromise and to combine pragmatically with other interests to achieve our major programmatic, institutional, legislative or appropriation goals.

I will skip over the faculty Internet reactions to the Listening Sessions except to say they are about what I would have expected. A few were very good, a few were totally off-the-wall, but most were correct in some part of what they said, but incomplete.

Breakout Group Reports

I am encouraged by the general coherence of the Group reports of this National Synthesis Conference and the consensus that seems to inform them. Strategic planning does not always end this way. I do have some general observations about the reports.

1. Across all the Group Reports there is a clear implication of a very large increase in demand for various types of social science expertise--far more than the colleges and the USDA now possess. Some of the demand is for expertise only found outside the colleges of agriculture in the university.
2. It is also worth noting that, while we are used to talking about agricultural systems as biological and production systems, today these Group Reports have broadened the systems concept to involve socio-cultural and economic systems in food and agriculture.
3. I am also struck by the return in these reports to the early goals and activities of the land grant system. These include the early focus on personal and public health, nutrition, human capital development, leadership formation, an emphasis on broad as well as technical education, the need to develop new institutions, management training, infrastructure development, integrative systems/holistic approach, and coalition building or partnering. I take this to be evidence that we are again in the midst of a major

transformation or metamorphosis. A major early dimension of land grant activity that is perhaps not well enough recognized in the Group Reports is that of building new institutions. Many of the actions recommended will require new institutional rules and organizations.

4. My visits to different land grant universities this year have made it clear that much of the change discussed in the group reports is already going on, and in the directions being recommended here.
5. As group 4 suggested many actions recommended will involve the land grant system in much of the conflict in the society. This makes it all the more important that the land grant colleges and universities maintain an objective science and education reputation and posture. It also means that academic freedom is a critical institution, if society expects a candid and objective performance of university faculty.

I am impressed by the broad consensus on action achieved here, and how relevant and comprehensive is the output, which these groups have achieved. This says we are ready to move. We were not a few years ago. We have a window of opportunity today to achieve these goals. It may be our last opportunity. I have participated in a lot of strategic planning just as you have. I have designed strategic planning processes. This current effort has been a thoughtful, well developed process, and I am pleased for the opportunity to participate. I do have to observe, however, that a program subjecting a large group of land grant administrators and others to five agricultural economists in a period of only 47 hours is clearly “cruel and unusual punishment.”

Nevertheless, I leave this National Synthesis Conference optimistic for the first time that we are finally prepared to do something about the accumulating dysfunctions in the land grant system’s obligation to serve its society. We are not alone in this effort. All of American higher education is in

what my football coach use to call a “prove it drill.” The land grant system has some unique advantages in this competition.

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