

# THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION

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In 1965 President Johnson invited the presidents of the state universities and land-grant colleges to a White House conference. He asked them what the universities could do to help solve the urgent problems of this society. He asserted that the universities had such a role; he was not sure what it was, but would they please get on with it. The presidents discussed over the next two years the question of the role of the university in public affairs. They could not even agree on a definition of what it was they were talking about. They then established a task force on public policy. This task force developed a description of the problem and approached Carnegie for support to study the issues. I became the Director, and was, in effect, asked to attempt to impose some intellectual order on the wide range of issues involved in the question of the university's involvement in society.

We got under way in the summer of 1968. I spent a careful first year just talking to the most knowledgeable people that I could find trying to define the problem. We then organized a team of five interviewers and went into our laboratory of universities. We interviewed across the faculty, student body, trustees, and administrations on eighteen campuses. In addition in each of the states involved, we tried to see the appropriate committee chairman and the primary political leaders in the house and senate of each state legislature, and if not the governor, those people on the governor's team closely involved in the issues of education. We attempted to identify and interview in the informal power structure of the state.

The prime objective of the study was to define public affairs as a university function. The study arises from the socially urgent issues that now press upon the university from the pathologies of urban life and of growth. These are the multiplicity of difficulties we call the "urban problem" (without really knowing what we are talking about) and the environmental problem and other unanticipated consequences of growth.

The university has long been involved in various aspects of societal problem solving. What is different, in the eyes of the university

presidents, is that the societal pressure today is for total university commitment. As society's problems have become more systemic, in order to respond we have had to put together a larger, more diverse package of resources. This forces us to deal with a very large part of the university at one time—not just one department or college. The presidents now find themselves in the middle of problems which in the past came in through the doors of the deans, the department chairmen, and the extension staff.

There are real dangers for the university whether it accepts or rejects society's challenge. If it completely rejects the challenge, there is a high risk of withdrawal of public support and a decline in the relevancy of the university as an institution in the society. The presidents see this very clearly. They also see that uncritical acceptance of all of society's demands could lead easily to resource exhaustion and certainly to a grave distortion of priorities and thus to a subversion and possibly even to destruction of the university as an institution.

The study has several objectives: (1) define public affairs as a university function; (2) develop the beginnings of a philosophy of public affairs for the university; (3) identify some of the criteria for university involvement in public affairs; and (4) identify some of the strategies of involvement that are open to a university.

In recent years I have written several papers highly critical of the way that we in the land-grant system manage our affairs. I said essentially that we were failing to realize our potential by so wide a margin as to almost constitute malfeasance, and that we were allowing our institutions in agriculture and in the land-grant system to grow obsolete. I also said that the changes going on around us were proceeding at a faster pace than we were adjusting to them. I still believe this.

In case after case of university involvement in societal problems of research and outreach systems, our potential far exceeds our performance. We in agriculture have a potential contribution to the university and to society of which we seem not to have the slightest inkling. People on the outside now seem to have a better appreciation of this than we. Everywhere I went on the study I discovered a positive attitude toward the land-grant experience. From the medical school to the business school, administrators worried over what they are going to do in this area are using the agricultural and land-grant experience as a model. There was nothing negative in their attitude toward the land-grant experience.

The prospect is exciting. And if we respond to the needs of the university in facing the urban crisis, environmental problems, and other specific public affairs challenges, even half as successfully as we

have already in the land-grant experience, another great chapter will have been written in the history of the land-grant tradition. If we fail to respond, not only will the land-grant tradition, I think, greatly lose in luster, but the university will likely cede to other, yet unknown institutional forms, its role as the knowledge center at the cutting edge of society's problem solving.

That is the nub of the problem. Those who have been deeply involved in the land-grant tradition have a contribution to make which is potentially staggering—if we will but grasp it. The challenge to the university today is quite as great as that of the challenge to the old land-grant college. It may in some ways be even more critical to the society.

### THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

The university is facing this challenge in a greatly changed and still rapidly changing environment. That the facts of life have changed I think we do not fully appreciate. Changes come so fast now, it is difficult to understand them. Let me mention what I believe are a number of the most important.

First, western civilization and the world are at a major node in history. We are in the middle of a transformation as great as that between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Many of our old assumptions about society and man must be re-examined. The purpose and utility of most major institutions must be re-examined, modified, and adapted to new conditions. The university is not excepted.

The public and private decision systems of society that the university must reach have grown so greatly in scale and have become so specialized in nature that access to them must be managed at not just local but regional and national levels today. Thus, the universities can no longer effect an impact on a major decision system with the local level strategy and inputs that have prevailed in the past. Although we have long had important national decision structures, the relative mix has changed so drastically that no one university or university outreach alone has the resources and organizational capacity, if it ever did, to deal effectively with national decision systems at the scale that now prevails, for example, in education, health, or transportation problems.

Society is becoming knowledge centered. The educational process has become central to economic and social processes and to growth itself. It is a major strategic input. In the early stages of industrialization society's capital was invested primarily in machines. Increasingly now the largest and most strategic investment is that made in human

resources, in organization devoted to problem solving, and to innovation in the production processes. If I may quote Gerrard Piel, "Today the economically significant industrial property is not the machine but the design and not so much the design as the capacity to innovate in process and product." This is scarcely physical property at all. Rather, it is an organizational capacity. It is the organization of human knowledge and the human capacity to create new knowledge. Thus, the university has become part of the knowledge industry, and finds itself so intimately involved and essential to society that its options no longer include withdrawal to the ivory tower. This message comes across from every president we talked to, from the private institutions to the land-grant universities.

The increasingly obvious necessity for life-long education and the demand this places on the university is one change for which we are unprepared both in organizational structure and in values. We simply have not faced this one, and it is upon us in all the professions.

We also have had a growing expectation of ever greater access to higher education that is moving us from mass education to universal access to higher education. This is the logical conclusion, the final step on the road on which we started in the nineteenth century when we committed ourselves to higher education as a component of a democratic society. This commitment is part of the land-grant tradition. It affects all public higher education and now even private education.

Finally, what is expected of the university as a corporate citizen has changed greatly in the past five years. This constrains now as it never did before university policies concerning admissions, employment, land use, purchasing, investment, and housing. It is a distinct category, I submit, from what you and I have in mind when we talk about university public affairs.

The university of today must inevitably be different from that of the Middle Ages, or of the Renaissance. Yet people talk about the university as if it were an ageless static entity. The university has long been evolving, even if slowly, in both its values and its organizational forms. And we are in the process of major change today. Every social institution is the product of its environment. The university is no exception.

#### CHANGES IN THE UNIVERSITY

Changes in the university itself are important to recognize if we are to understand the problems of university public affairs.

First, in twenty years we have transformed the scale of the uni-

versity so incredibly as to put almost every question about universities into an entirely different context. The university is now a large-scale organization.

Second, we are now all bureaucrats. Universities are bureaucracies, the professor no less than the building and maintenance people.

Third, the research function has grown far more than any other dimension of the university. Many things could be said about that, including the fact that it has distorted our priorities, which we are now in the process of re-examining.

Fourth, is the great failure of liberal education. Our curriculum is in shambles today because no one knows the values around which it should be organized. What had given it coherence in the past, even in technical education, was the value system that underlay a liberal education. The collapse of this value system has led to a failure of nerve that is central to the current debate over what a university is or should be, what the curriculum should be, and what the faculty can contribute. I might add as a footnote that the light at the end of the tunnel, as I see it, is to be found in a little book by Sir Eric Ashby called *Technology and the Academics*. He argues that we must reorganize the undergraduate curriculum around what he calls technology or applied science, the application and the uses of technology, if we are to recapture coherence and meaning.

Finally, the whole structure of governance and the distribution of power within university decision making has been transformed within the last twenty years. The faculty has over this period slowly gained formal access to the decision process. But the faculty is now being overrun from behind by a substantial rise in student access to the power of decision and representation in governance. This is all matched by a decline in the administrator's power of decision.

The universities are totally unlegitimized institutions today. I was amazed at the bitter hatred of universities and all their works which we encountered in our interviews in the informal and formal power structure of the states, and on boards of regents. The university is in serious trouble. It now has to relegitimize itself in a very fundamental way. This is not just a transitory phenomenon, it has been building for a good twenty years.

The choice that the faculty now has is really a very simple one. It is between the transfer of power of decision either to their own administrators or to trustees generally ignorant of what universities are about. Most trustees we talked to did not have the foggiest notion what a university truly should be or how it should function. They were

not selected for that purpose. They were never expected to mess around on “the inside,” but there they are now competing with the students and the faculty to see who can destroy the executive function first. Somebody is going to have to defend the university and in many cases against the trustees.

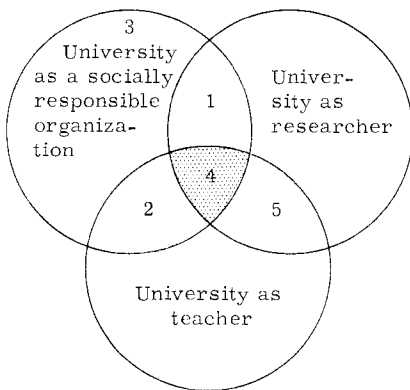
The university must reform itself before it can hope to reform society. We are not going to be successful in major outreach missions in new social problems until we face up to the problems that we have on the inside. Many of these problems are the result of the fact that we are more intimately involved with society today and may not escape those “outside” problems even on the inside any longer.

### THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

What do we mean by university public affairs? How is it defined? It is clear that the conventional notion of teaching, research, and service, in which service is equated with the university’s public affairs role, is entirely wanting as either a description or a conceptual statement.

As the university’s various public affairs activities are sorted into distinct categories, it becomes clear that public affairs is not a unitary or pure category such as teaching or research. The one common thread or dimension is social response or responsibility, but it is clearly more complex. If you will turn to the diagram below you can see how we finally sorted out the primary elements of the definition of university public affairs.

#### A SUGGESTED PARADIGM



1. Mission-oriented research.
2. Manpower training and professional and graduate education.
3. University behavior and activities undertaken as a responsible corporate citizen of its immediate specific communities.
4. The central public affairs commitments involving development processes, delivery systems, and institution building.
5. Renewal of the university—through research inputs to teaching and the education of the next generation of university researchers.

At least three dimensions seem essential: the university as a researcher, the university as a teacher, and the university as a socially

responsible organization. The true public affairs role is always a combination of the three. Thus, category 4 in the diagram is the heartland of university public affairs.

What are the characteristics of university public affairs besides involving research, teaching, and some public commitment? We found that these public affairs activities in some degree involve developmental processes. Second, we found that in mature form they involved institution building. And third, there was invariably a conscious articulated delivery system for knowledge. These are the essential characteristics.

In practice where we draw the line between what is and what is not university public affairs depends both on the nature of the environment and the values that the university has been built around.

Thus, we would define public affairs as those activities of a university beyond its immediate civic responsibilities that involve *conscious corporate commitment* to some role in the *problem solving efforts* of society and focused on the developing of human, national and community resources. It involves a *purposive delivery of the university's special competence and resources* to organizations and individuals outside the university. This reaching out into the processes of society will usually lead to participation in the *creation of new institutions* to facilitate problem solving. University public affairs is the response of the university to what it perceives to be primary local, state, regional, national, or world needs. Thus, it is university teaching and research combined in problem solving missions, conceived in the *public interest* and ordered by the university's understanding of the priorities of social need and the constraints of the university's special competencies, resources, and societal environment.

University public affairs activities are only parts of larger public affairs social systems. Each system is unique. Thus, we must conclude that any attempt to construct a general university public affairs structure for all purposes is a difficult if not illusory objective. Second, our experience indicates that each public affairs system must be designed, or institutionalized, around a specific and concrete objective. Third, the university, which has limited resources and expertise, must consciously choose those specific university public affairs systems that it will support. It cannot support an indefinite number. Fourth, the university is only one actor in any public affairs system. It cannot solve any social problem by itself. To raise such expectations is irresponsible.

The present set of constraints and the environment suggest that one of the most difficult things the university faces right now is making choices, limiting itself so that it can attain some of its ends. The

problem that we have gotten ourselves into is that we have, in too many instances, promised everything to everybody, and not delivered on a fraction of it. This is one reason for the decline of the legitimacy of the university.

### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESS

What are the characteristics of the successful systems? First, they all have some useful knowledge to deliver. Therefore, research is a necessary prior input. You can see it in our own land-grant experience. The idea of extension never really worked until the research investment provided something that extension could deliver. Some means of communicating research knowledge has to be provided. A professional journal just will not do. Since the Middle Ages the researcher has been committed to communication of his knowledge and to the fact that it must become public knowledge. What has happened is that the environment has changed so drastically that it will no longer do just to print it. We simply must have a better delivery system today. We must link out into society and also (something that I find many extension people do not always appreciate) we have to link back into the university's resources. Extension people will sometimes do a marvelous job of wiring together the outside and fail to do their homework. Often to be successful as much politicking is needed inside the university as outside.

Another critical dimension comes up in the necessity for institution building. It is critical because in a sense we are forced in the solution of most problems to create new institutional arrangements. The degree of consensus that prevails in a community must be at a reasonable level or we will not succeed. We just do not go out and successfully change society forcibly. The higher the level of consensus the less the risk and the higher the probability of success. In most cases, program people describe a need for the creation and organization of clientele to sustain new programs. It would appear that the degree to which this is a concomitant of program success depends on the degree of consensus in the community concerning the program goals and the means used to attain those goals. If the community and its major organizations agree that some set of objectives should be pursued, there is far less need to develop specific clientele organizations. On the other hand, programs being developed for embattled minority groups quite clearly will encounter difficulty in becoming self-sustaining until politically effective clientele actively support the program.

We must always proceed in a manner that does not threaten or challenge any of those groups with which we have to cooperate. I



sometimes think we have almost forgotten this strategic approach in the land-grant tradition. This approach means that, as a matter of initial strategy, we must practice a very careful organizational neutrality. Later we may have more freedom with the same groups of people but not initially when we lack full credibility. Also, we probably should not become involved in institution building initially. The creation of new organizational structures inevitably threatens someone in an existing structure.

Another important strategic consideration is that of responding to the felt needs of various groups in the community. There are several reasons: In the long run, we have to in order to create viable programs, and also to gain credibility. In the short run, we end up responding to some pretty minor, even silly, things sometimes to gain access (and are criticized for it), but it is still a strategic consideration.

Another dimension of importance is being very careful not to take full credit for program accomplishments. Taking such credit is a strategic error often made in building new university public affairs systems.

When institutions are being developed for a program, a natural human instinct frequently destroys their potential. And that is the desire to eliminate all ambiguity from organizational relationships and role definitions. It must be resisted. It is ambiguity that most often creates both the incentive and the freedom for initiative and creativity on the part of individuals as well as organizations.

Pragmatic behavior is a trait of those involved in successful public affairs systems. It is necessary for survival in most social and all political processes. Academics are not known for their pragmatism and this becomes the basis for much of the difficulty that faculty members encounter when they become involved in university public affairs activities.

The nature of our society is changing. We cannot even do the old cooperative extension act the same way we were doing it twenty years ago—and we are not. The greatest residuum of knowledge about how to do university public affairs clearly resides in the land-grant tradition. It would be criminal if we do not respond to the needs of the rest of the university in facing its challenge in public affairs.

I believe the universities have a great potential in public affairs if they will focus on the problems of society. Great changes are occurring in the understanding of the land-grant experience. Perhaps we are overly defensive in agriculture. We have been at the receiving end of too many pot shots and on the outside for too long. We should learn to relax and be sensitive to others, while doing our best and letting

the chips fall where they may. People experienced in the land-grant tradition have a great contribution to make in the challenge universities face in mounting new university public affairs systems.