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POLICY / CHANGE DIALOGUES

REPORT

Terms of Engagement: Renewing the Role of the University as an Urban Institution

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Presenter: Prof. David Perry, Professor and Director, Great Cities Institute and Associate Chancellor, University of Illinois at Chicago University of Illinois

Chair: Dr. Jim Leatt, Executive Director, Cape Higher Education Consortium

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I strongly believe in a university *of*,
not simply *in*, the city. But that hope
does not imply that it ought to be or
can be the same things as a city.

Thomas Bender (1998)

At a time when pressures of mergers and
acquisitions make corporations increasingly
footloose, colleges and universities have
remained one of the few enduring urban
institutions—institutions that can serve as
economic anchors for the revitalization of our cities.

Paul Grogan (2002)

Just as universities make great cities, a great city makes a great
university.

Mayor Richard J. Daley
Upon laying the cornerstone for UIC (1963)

As a researcher, scientist and member of the faculty of UIC, I am not in
principle opposed to the notion of the 'engaged university', or even to
the notion of a 'scholarship' of engagement. It is the *terms of
engagement* that must be clearly spelled out so that there is no
confusion for faculty or community over the role of research and its
beneficial relationship with those external to the academy.

Donald Chambers

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Introduction

Prof David Perry's presentation followed his visit to Port Elizabeth where he gave a keynote address at a conference on *Higher Education and the City: Implications of Engagement for a University in the Nelson Mandela Metro,* which was held 16-17 September, 2003 at the University of Port Elizabeth. Although internationally this is an area of growing interest, there has been very little focused discussion of the topic in South Africa[1].

Professor Perry's presentation drew from the experiences of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) - where he is Professor and Director of the Great Cities Institute – as it has grappled with the challenges of transforming the way in which it relates to its surrounding community, primarily the City of Chicago. His presentation addressed a number of issues related to universities as urban institutions, as well as attempts by institutions such as UIC to become 'engaged' institutions.

Universities as Urban Institutions

In their daily institutional practices, universities have very real impacts on cities: they employ people, they are major providers and consumers of goods and services, and their buildings change the character of the landscape and transform neighbourhoods. Their students and programmes directly impact upon the quality of those inhabiting other key institutions within the city. For example, one out of every ten college graduates in the Chicago land-area is a UIC graduate, one out of every six doctors was trained at UIC, one out of every three dentists in Illinois graduated from UIC and UIC is the single most important source of school teachers in Chicago. These features of university-community 'relations' - the importance of community to the university as a source of professional opportunity for its students on the one hand, and the importance of the university as a center of learning for the community's citizens - speaks to a larger point of parity needs and opportunities between the university and its community.

Put more generally, this parity is evidence of the real, including academic, embeddedness of the university in its community, of its engagement with its surroundings both as an institution and in the relations that advance education and the creation of knowledge. However such parity is not always recognised. Quite often universities are perceived less as urban institutions and more as distant, unresponsive 'ivory towers', and their surrounding communities are often viewed by academics - if acknowledged at all - as sites for experimentation or application, and not as centres of knowledge themselves, or places of partnership in the education process and the creation of new knowledge.

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[1] The exception is the Learning Cape initiative, which has seen a number of seminars being held in the Western Cape over the last two years to discuss the role of higher education in regional development.

It is not uncommon to hear communities criticizing universities for their imperious, unresponsive policies, and their intrusive impacts. It is also not uncommon to find that the value of the community or city to the university is registered in the phrase: "the city is a good laboratory for study." The history of universities and their communities is replete with community critique of academic arrogance, much of it well placed.

The traditional notion of the university is that of a 'campus': a green field of fields that is made up of quads that organise students and staff into ideal communities of knowledge. As they grow, universities develop land, expand and create urban space in what can only be described as an anti-urban, exclusive, and 'un-neighbourly', community.

This has certainly been the case not only with respect to the University of Illinois at Chicago, but also with many urban-based universities around the world. However, at the same time that the university has isolated itself from its surrounding community, UIC has also been the site of one of the more comprehensive attempts by a research university to consciously reflect on its role as an urban institution, with its primary mission of "education and the creation of new knowledge."

In many respects, the founding of many a higher education institution is tied to a response to the needs of society. Many of the elite liberal arts colleges were founded around a religiously motivated, social mission, directed to both students and social change. Similarly, the public research university in the United States has been built upon a land - grant tradition. The problem is that research universities in general and liberal arts colleges more particularly have become unreconstructed centres of the production of knowledge independent of context, and the teaching of students in isolation from their immediate context. Basic research has become consistently de-coupled from applied research or extension. As the public university moved from the rural countryside to the city, the articulation of an urban land grant mission was rarely part of the new public mission.

Traditionally, the research university mission has been organised around the uneven, and often conflicting, triumvirate of research, teaching and service (r-t-s), with a primacy placed on research. The service mission has yet to become an equal part of faculty practice, with an institutional reward system that recognises it as a meaningful academic enterprise, and a culture of engagement that makes it a significant part of individual faculty practice.

Recently this traditional configuration of university mission (r-t-s) has begun to change in response to a host of pressures from within and outside the academy. Students, parents, public officials, academic organisations, foundations, and public and private agencies from the regional to the global level are clearly challenging the processes and relevance of higher education, calling for changes that reflect a new and fuller integration of research, teaching and service. Notwithstanding this call to relevance, there has been a decline in support for higher education in almost every state in the US, even as the number of universities has doubled in cities, and the number of

students attending schools of higher education has continued to rise dramatically (almost quadrupling in the second half of the last century).

Service within the 'imperial university' had come to be viewed as an ancillary activity of 'outreach', where the expertise of the university has essentially been 'extended' to needy external communities. This notion of service, however, is slowly changing. Rather than isolate the service mission of the urban public research university through discrete activities and programmes of 'outreach' and 'extension', it is becoming redefined, comprehensively, as part of the core of activities of an engaged university.

The University as an Engaged Institution

The notion of the engaged institution is gaining a new currency among institutional planners and higher education administrative leadership in the United States. A broad array of universities, foundations and organisations of higher education has recast the notion of service as the civic mission of the university. Borrowing from a liberal and pragmatic tradition of education going back over one hundred years, there is a call for students and faculty to engage in a renewed, if not totally new, research and teaching that supplies civic purpose and public meaning to the production of knowledge in the university. Here the notion of service is captured in a new language of civic engagement.

There is recognition of a need to change the language of engagement from service and outreach carried out at the margins or periphery of the universities (compared to the core mission of teaching and research located at the disciplinary centre of the university structure) to one of partnership and interdisciplinarity and impact. This would be a situation where engagement is the balanced celebration of the city's contributions to the core mission of the university, and the university – in terms of its realisation of its educational mission and in terms of its physical, economic and social contributions to the urban – is viewed as a partner of the city.

In the US such engagement is slowly being created by new engines of university development, some of which are the following:

1. The Community Outreach Partnership Centres (COPC) at over 130 universities in 37 states.

2. The Kellogg Commission on the Engaged University - The Portfolio Project

3. Carnegie Foundation on the Scholarship of Engagement

4. The Pericles Foundation Project on Serve and Learn

5. The US Department of Education Title Four Grants on Service Learning

6. Campus Compact, which has over 1400 colleges and universities

7. The Great Cities Universities Consortium

These national reformulations of university-community relations, and new languages of higher education engagement, suggest a broader, and more inclusive, institutional mission. This has been referred to as the scholarship of engagement wherein research and teaching can achieve new forms of excellence through civic engagement, regional development and heuristic relevance and partnership. In other words, this new scholarship of engagement implies not outreach, but partnership, whereby students, faculty and external communities are fully and equally engaged, working in transdisciplinary, dynamic, flexible partnerships of research and learning.

Internationally, regional and cross-national organisations are developing policies to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives. For example, the OECD has undertaken a formal programme to encourage universities to make a contribution to the national and sub regional development process. Another example is the EUREXTER project, through which the European Union has moved to create models of university-region engagement in pursuit of excellence in research, which will advance the civic and economic development of its regions, and of Europe in general. The very notion of service is being transformed into research excellence that in turn reflects regional development in global contexts.

In concluding his presentation, Prof Perry posed questions around four themes that, he suggested, could be the basis for the seminar discussion. These were:

1. The university as an urban institution: How can we study universities as institutions of society?

2. The accessible university: How do we rank or evaluate the urban university in the light of new political pressures and economic demands?

3. The engaged university: How do we construct a new university that at once provides access and excellence and is a major contributing urban institution?

4. The university as urban developer: How do we build, and blend, 'campus' and 'city'?

Discussion

There was limited time to engage with the above questions, and the remainder of the seminar was used to respond to questions posed from the floor.

Question: ***How does the university negotiate its terms of engagement in the light of the varied demands that emanate from the urban, regional, national, and even continental levels?***

Prof Perry's response was that we must not think in terms of levels. It shouldn't matter whether engagement is targeted at the local, regional or national level. What matters is engagement.

Question: ***What strategies can be developed to get institutions engaged?***

The strategies that have been implemented at UIC are primarily around interventions in the areas of <u>leadership</u>, <u>resources</u> and <u>reward structures</u>. The leadership strategy is about driving the university mission, and the creative reinvigoration of internal practice. It is about providing leadership that entrenches a relevant theme of engagement from Vice-Chancellor, to Deans, to Heads of Departments.

A second strategy is about committing 'hard-core', recurring, funding for university-wide activities that are critical to sustaining the mission of engagement. Finally, another important strategy is about creating a reward structure that establishes a research system and a culture of engagement that does not artificially separate and rank, research, teaching and service.

Question: ***What is the effect of declining resources (e.g. reduced government expenditure on higher education) on the mechanisms for facilitating engagement?***

A short answer is that creativity is required. Most higher education systems throughout the world are experiencing a financial squeeze, which means that institutions have to work within the parameters of resource constraints.

Question: ***What are some of the shortcomings that have been experienced by the University of Illinois at Chicago as it grapples with the challenge of engagement?***

One of the key concerns has been the retention of first-generation students, many of whom are at risk of dropping out before completing their studies.

Question: ***How do you develop a relationship of parity between the university and the community?***

There has to be a constant flow of information. One of the mechanisms that has been used at UIC is periodic meetings between the university and the community. These meetings have been used to appraise each other of developments that would contribute to better engagement.

Central to the development of a partnership between the university and the community is an understanding, by the university, of what it can or cannot do.

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